Procedia Engineering
Volume 143, 2016, Pages 1016–1023
Advances in Transportation Geotechnics 3 . The 3rd International Conference on Transportation Geotechnics (ICTG 2016)

# Quantifying Degradation of Railway Ballast using Numerical Simulations of Micro-Deval Test and In-situ Conditions

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**Abstract**
Throughout the life of the track, ballast grains wear as a result of both the trains passing over the track and the maintenance operations (tamping). The morphology of the grains is changed: they lose angularity and fine particles are produced, causing a gradual loss of track performance. Eventually ballast renewal becomes necessary. In order to predict the evolution of this degradation, a multi-scale study is proposed. A comparison between discrete element method (DEM) simulations of Micro-Deval attrition test and of the passage of trains over a sleeper is performed in order to both detect the different loading and wearing mechanisms involved and quantify the amount of friction work produced, which is directly related to friction wear. The same numerical approach is also used with the simulations of the track to detect families of contacts in order to determine characteristic loading paths at the micro-scale. Loads and displacements of both systems are then compared in order to discuss the relevance of the Micro-Deval test.

*Keywords:* ballast grains, Discrete Elements Method, wear, Micro-Deval

## 1 Introduction

Ballast is the granular layer composed of centimetric-sized irregular rock grains upon which the rails and sleepers are laid in ballasted railway tracks. This layer plays a crucial role in the transmission of dynamic stress imposed by the circulation of trains to the geotechnical structure supporting the track. The performance of ballast, as a thin layer of coarse grains, strongly depends on the shape, size and mineralogical nature of the grains composing it. Throughout the life of the track ballast particles wear, as a result of both the trains passing over the track and the maintenance operations (tamping), steadily reducing the angularity of the grains and producing very small particles ($d < 0.5$ mm) that will

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Programme Committee of ICTG 2016

doi:10.1016/j.proeng.2016.06.096

eventually induce a loss of track performance: the internal friction angle is reduced limiting both the anchorage of sleepers and the transfer of loads to the platform, and the presence in excess of fine particles renders tamping ineffective (fast evolution of track defaults after tamping) and reduces the permeability of the track.

After some years of service of the first high-speed railway lines in France (HSL), ballast has proven not to be resistant enough, showing a faster degradation than expected. Ballast replacement has therefore been required much before than its originally expected lifespan. Thus, in order to achieve the goal of maximizing ballast lifespan in future tracks, it is necessary to obtain a predictive model of ballast wear when it is subjected to complex loads.

Wear in granular materials is a very complex process and it involves many different mechanisms. The classically used Archard's model (Archard, 1953), presented in Equation (1), assumes that the generated volume of wear (W), i.e. the volume of fine particles produced, is proportional to both the normal force (fn) and the relative displacement between the surfaces (s). The constant of proportionality k/H, which value will be determined with the experimental tests during the second phase of the project, represents the hardness of the softest material (H) and a dimensionless constant (k) usually called wear constant. Although the model was conceived for flat surfaces, it has been widely used even for discrete elements simulations in granular media (Rojek, et al., 2008) (Rycroft, et al., 2013). This model will be used as a basic tool to get a first approach to the wear quantification. However, it will be necessary to validate and calibrate the model based on experiments before using it as a reliable predictive tool.

$$W = k\,\frac{f_n \cdot s}{H} \tag{1}$$

Wear is a micro-scale variable which depends on the macro-scale constraints to which ballast is subjected. Discrete elements simulations of ballast are thus proposed in order to assess the load at the contact scale, i.e. to undertake a scale change moving from the track scale to the contact one. However, due to calculation time, memory constraints, and the absence of good methods to simulate fracture and wear, numerical simulations cannot be precise enough when assessing micro-scale values: fine production and loss of angularity or roughness are not directly inferred from simulations, and must be therefore obtained from experimental data.

Empirically, in order to ensure a good performance of ballast against attrition, standard tests are performed in the quarry over some material samples to check and classify the quality of the extracted rock. Following the corresponding European railway CE marking (Conformité Européenne), attrition resistance of ballast grains is experimentally assessed in a Micro-Deval device (AFNOR, 1996) (AFNOR, 2003). The numerous contacts within the device, both between grains and with the steel drum, produce an accelerated wear process which causes changes in the morphology of ballast grains similar to those produced in the track. Due to that it is repeatedly reproducible both experimentally and numerically, Micro-Deval represents a good test to be used as a link between both kinds of results.

Thus Micro-Deval test is simulated to link the microscopic loading path with the production of fine particles using Archard equation as a very first approach. Using the same numerical approach at the track scale, simulations of train passages allow the determination of the microscopic loading in track conditions. Finally, both systems are compared in terms of loads, displacements and wear mechanisms in order to discuss the relevance of this test. The presented work is englobed in a larger project, which englobes both numerical and experimental data, with the final objective of obtaining a predictive model of ballast wear as a function of the applied stress at the track scale. The results of the first phase of this 3-year research project, concerning DEM simulations, are presented in this paper.

# 2 DEM Simulations

The DEM software used is LMGC90, open source software which allows running 3D models (Dubois, et al., 2011) with Non-smooth Contact Dynamics (Jean, 1999). A database of 1000 polyhedral ballast grains has been used to randomly build the samples.

## 2.1 Micro-Deval

Micro-Deval attrition test has been numerically built following the European codes: the cylinder follows the geometric requirements with a 200 mm inner diameter and a length of 400 mm, and turns at an angular velocity of 100 rpm. In the case of the presented simulation, 109 grains, randomly chosen from the database, cover the required 10 kg of ballast (using a density of 2700 kg/m$^3$ corresponding to granite).

A friction coefficient of 0.8 has been used between ballast grains, and of 0.4 between grains and the steel drum (lateral walls included). Perfectly inelastic collisions are considered, i.e. with a restitution coefficient equal to zero. Since grains are considered as perfectly rigid bodies and no wear or crushing is considered, simulating the 140 minutes of the real test does not provide any extra information from that already provided by just some drum rotations at the steady state. Thus the simulation has been performed along 35.5 seconds (which corresponds to 59 rotations of the drum at 100 rpm), with a calculation time step of $10^{-4}$ s. However, data has been written every 50 calculation time steps, i.e. with a writing time step of $5 \cdot 10^{-3}$ s.

## 2.2 Train Passing Over a Sleeper

Searching for a compromise between calculation time and enough representative results, only half transversal section of a track has been considered to model the passage of a bogie over a sleeper. The section is limited longitudinally by two frictionless walls leaving a sample length of 1 m, and transversally by a frictionless wall in the inner side of the track (corresponding to the middle plane between rails, i.e. the symmetry plane) and a free boundary in the outer side. The floor is also considered as a rigid plane with a friction coefficient of 0.8. The corresponding block of a twin-block sleeper is located longitudinally centred.

A total of 22756 grains of ballast fill the considered section. The friction coefficient considered is 0.8, both between grains and between sleeper and grains. A double cyclic vertical force of 23 kN (each peak) is applied over the sleeper, each peak corresponding to the axle semiload of a HSL bogie at 300 kph. The simulation has been performed with a time step of $2 \cdot 10^{-4}$ s and data has been written with a time step of $10^{-3}$ s (every 5 time steps).

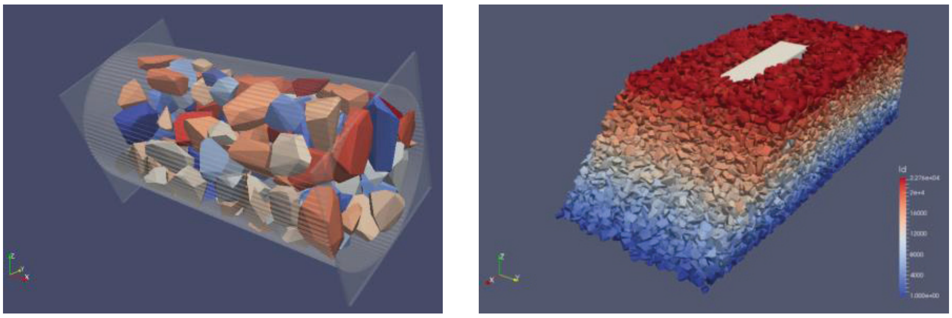

**Figure 1:** a) Snapshot of the Micro-Deval simulation. b) Snapshot of the track simulation.

# 3 Analysis and Results

Following the different objectives described, two main analyses have been set:

- A global analysis of different contact quantities (density, normal force, relative displacement, friction work, etc.) is performed in order to detect the sources of grain wear and to make a very first approach to assess qualitatively the production of fine particles using Archard.
- A change in scale from track scale to contact scale is performed in order to search for families of contacts. Characteristic microscopic loading paths are then extracted for a future use in a shearing device called BCR3D, conceived to control each axis independently. The contacts inside the Micro-Deval device are too short so this line of analysis is only applied to the simulation of the track.

## 3.1 Sources of Wear

In order to study the different magnitudes of the system at a global scale, a spatial distribution is proposed. To do that, the quantities are integrated along the simulation time inside every element of a fixed mesh. Thus the values are not linked to the grains but to the elements of the mesh, averaged among all the contacts located within in each time step.

The Micro-Deval test is a dynamic system in which grains turn very fast at almost the same speed as the cylinder (100 rpm). The grains first go upwards due to the centrifuge force and the friction between grains and cylinder, to then, in a second phase, they are unstuck from the cylinder due to gravity and they fall freely to the lower-left side of the cylinder, impacting against the steel drum or against other grains and starting again the upward movement.

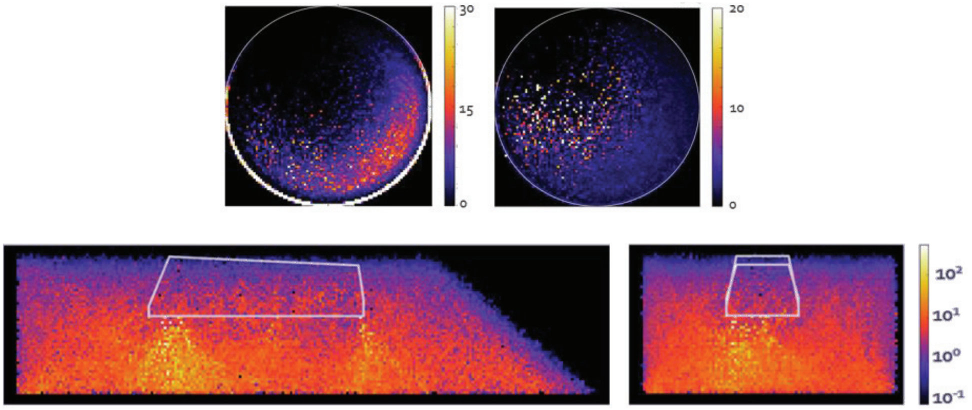

**Figure 2:** a) Cumulated force (left) and average force (right), in Newtons, along one Micro-Deval drum turn. b) Average normal force along one passage of a bogie.

Due to the high density of grains in the upward trajectory, most of contacts are produced here. These contacts are quite stable along time but their intensity is low (with an average normal force of less than 2 N between ballast grains). In Figure 2, the plot of the cumulated normal force per turn shows this accumulation of contacts in the lower-right side of the cylinder. On the other hand, impacts after this free-fall phase are much stronger (with contacts of more than 1 kN) but last for just one time step. The average normal force in each local mesh element shows how impacts on the left side are much stronger and irregular than those occurring during the upward phase. The first phase would presumably produce slow but constant degradation while the second phase, much more violent, would produce fast degradation and eventually even grain crushing.

The passage of a train is a much more static system and this difference between cumulated and average forces cannot be observed. Instead, the weight of the sleeper and of the train is transmitted to the platform through strong columns of grains, which absorb the majority of the efforts. In Figure 2 the average normal force along one loading cycle is plotted, showing how the forces spread downwards in a triangular shape. These chains of forces are created in specific places, being those grains located just under the sleeper the ones supporting the highest contact forces. If the whole sample is considered, the variance of normal contact forces is high, which is understandable since many areas are almost not loaded (free boundaries) and other receive the majority of the efforts (under the sleeper). During one loading cycle, the average contact normal force of the sample is only 8 N, while 1% of the contacts exceeds 75 N, and 0.1% surpasses 300 N. However, the maximum normal force rises to more than 12 kN. If these results are compared to a relaxed phase, where no exterior force is applied, the highest efforts are the most affected: the maximum contact force in a relaxed phase is barely 1 kN, while only 0.1% of contacts exceeds 90 N. Nevertheless, the average is only reduced to 5 N, i.e. most of the ballast is actually inactive and only used as a dead mass.

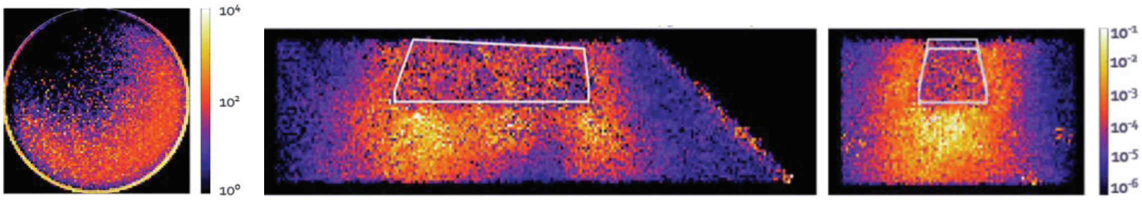

**Figure 3:** Friction work, in J / mm2, along one Micro-Deval turn (left) and one passage of a bogie (right).

In order to detect the potential zones of wear and to perform a first qualitative analysis of wear production, Archard's model is used. Work produced by friction forces, between two grains in contact, is assumed to be proportional to the product between the contact normal force and the relative displacement between the grains. Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of the cumulated friction work during a complete rotation of the Micro-Deval drum (0.6 seconds). The first thing that can be noticed is that impact zones (less but stronger contacts) develop the same order of magnitude of cumulated friction work than the dense zone (more but weaker contacts). In addition, it can be observed a significant amount of work appearing over the surface of the cylinder, which does not necessarily mean that the ballast-drum contacts are the main generators of wear. The space-fixed nature of the mesh causes a constant presence of contacts within the mesh elements over the drum surface, leading to a higher sum of friction work, i.e. there is not necessarily more work generated by these contacts but many more contacts in these specific mesh elements. On the other side, the two different materials (granite and steel) absorb contact energy in a different proportion (different speeds of degradation and heating) so it is not obvious to deal with them. The actual contribution of ballast-drum contacts in the Micro-Deval test should be studied carefully during the different experimental tests to be performed in a future phase of the project.

The same plot in the track simulation along one loading cycle (0.1 seconds), shows a higher potential wear all around the sleeper, and especially at the areas just below the sleeper. Some work is also observed over the slope in the free boundary, due to some grains rolling down. Comparing the order of magnitude of the work of both simulations, Micro-Deval shows a much higher wear potential than the passage of a bogie, which is not surprising since the attrition test is conceived for generating an accelerated degradation on the grains. Besides, the grains in the Micro-Deval erode in a very homogeneous way, showing a much lower variance. In the track simulation, since the whole sample is considered, the variance is high leading to only 1% of the grains absorbing more than 50% of the total friction work. Concerning the sleeper, it absorbs between 1% and 2% of the total work.

In summary, Micro-Deval and track have different mechanisms for degrading grains. Micro-Deval generates higher and more homogeneous friction work, which is directly related to friction wear. This degradation comes from friction between grains but also from impacts after the free fall phase and friction between the grains and the steel drum. These two last mechanisms are not very representative of what actually happens in the track. In addition, Micro-Deval degradation is homogeneous, not only because all grains wear more or less at the same speed, but also because each grain receives impacts all around its surface due to the dynamic nature of the test. On the other side, grains in the track have a very restricted movement, so they are in contact with the adjacent grains at approximately the same surface areas, causing a local mechanism of wear. This local wear will change the shape of the grain, eventually causing a rearrangement of grains and wear affecting other areas of the grain.

Even with all these differences, what has been observed in actual HSL is that the final morphology of ballast grains is very similar after a Micro-Deval test and after being in the track for a long period of time.

## 3.2 Microscopic Loading

The main goal of this study is to detect and classify, if they exist, different families of relatively permanent contacts that can be considered as characteristic, either due to their repetitiveness or to their importance in the wear process of the grains. These contacts will be then reproduced and studied, in a further stage of the project, using a shearing machine capable of controlling all three axes independently (BCR3D (Armand, 2000)). This analysis is carried out only in the simulation of the passage of a bogie.

During the first part of the study (section 3.1), contacts were considered at each time step independently, so that contacts remaining in time was not contemplated. On the contrary, this second part of the study needs contact remaining in time to be considered. To do so, each contact concerning two specific grains starts to count when it first appears, it is monitored at each time step (type of contact, position, contact force, relative displacement, etc.) until there is a lack of it in one time step which will be considered the end of the contact. Thus if it appears in a later stage, it will be counted as a different contact, even if it concerns the same two grains. In this way, different quantities can be studied, such as the duration in time of the contacts (T), the cumulated displacement or trajectory of the contacts (D) and the effective displacement (δ), i.e. the distance between the final recorded position and the initial one. In order to facilitate the geometric interpretation, only simple contacts are considered, i.e. those grains which share a unique point in common while in contact. Besides, since the goal is to detect relatively permanent contacts, contacts lasting for just one time step are omitted. Finally, when talking about contact trajectories, the local frame of each grain is considered, i.e. the trajectory will be the trace left by a contact on the surface of the grain (Figure 4).

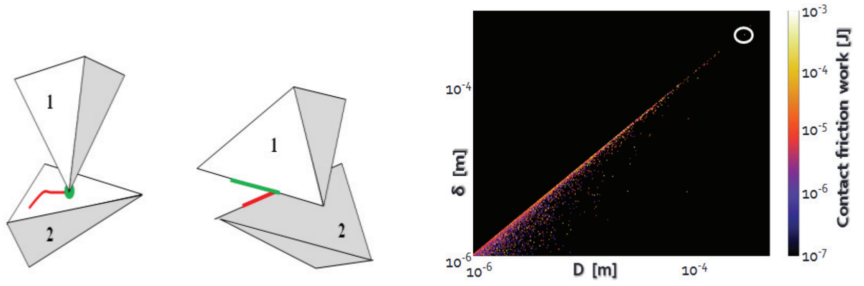

**Figure 4:** a) Trajectory in the local frame of each grain of vertex-surface contact and edge-edge contact. In green, trajectory in the local frame of grain 1, in red in the local frame of grain 2. b) Cumulated-effective displacement plot, zooming in on the contacts with $\delta > 10^{-6}$ m. The contact object of study is circled in white.

A cyclic loading like the one concerning the passage of a bogie can presumably generate two main families of contacts: contacts with a relatively linear trajectory in which cumulative (D) and effective (δ) displacements have similar values, and contacts with a high vibrating trajectory, in which D will be significantly higher than δ.

Figure 4 shows the D-δ plot zooming on the contacts with an effective displacement (δ) higher than $10^{-6}$ m, which represents only 0.6% of the contacts but more than 25.0% of the total work of the system. The colours represent the amount of work generated by the contact. Although contacts lasting for just one time step have not been considered, most of the contacts are still situated over the line D=δ or very close to it, i.e. mostly linear trajectories. As expected, contacts with higher displacements generally show a higher work generation. However further groups or families cannot be distinguished. One of the possible reasons could be the amount of calculating time and memory the computer needs both to simulate and to deal with the great amount of output data. Due to this restriction, a maximum of two cycles of loading (of a total of 13 cycles applied along the whole test) have been treated at the same time so far. A different approach considering only the areas of maximum work generation is planned in future analysis. Nevertheless, the whole simulation lasts for only 6 seconds, not allowing big rearrangements of grains and restricting considerably this approach.

Even though this work is a very first attempt to classify contacts (failing to give the expected results), it is useful to detect some individual contacts that are worth studying. In particular, there is one contact that stands out among the others. This contact has one of the highest values in cumulated (0.19 mm) and effective (0.17 mm) displacements and work generated ($10^{-3}$ J) and it lasts for 25 time steps (0.025 s) before the first interruption. Knowing that, a microscopic study has been performed on the contact between these two specific grains along the total duration of the two cycles of loading, with the observed pause in between (0.33 s in total).

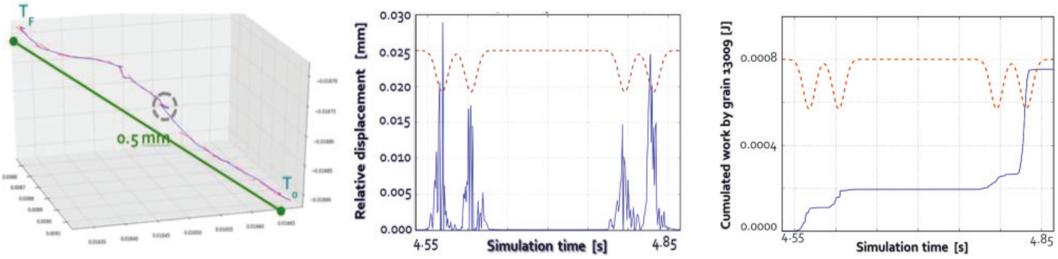

**Figure 5:** a) Trajectory of the contact over the face of the "scratched" grain. The stop between the two loading cycles has been circled in grey. b) Relative displacement between both grains throughout time. c) Work absorbed by one of the grains along the described contact. Cyclic load plotted (dashed line) as a reference.

The considered contact corresponds to a vertex-face contact between two grains located just below the sleeper. Figure 5 shows the trajectory followed by the vertex over the face, i.e. the "scratch" left by one grain over the other. The trajectory is mostly linear and monotonic, i.e. without coming back, along a 0.5 mm path. It is also possible to distinguish the pause between the two loading cycles as a zone of little and vibrating movement. Figure 5 also shows the evolution throughout the time of the relative displacement between both grains, and the cumulated amount of work absorbed by one grain along the two loading cycles, assuming that each grain absorbs 50 % of the contact energy. As expected, the evolution of both values reaches the greater increments exactly at the peaks of the external load.

# 4 Conclusions and perspectives

In this paper two DEM simulations have been presented, one corresponding to the Micro-Deval attrition test, and the other corresponding to the passage of a train over a sleeper at 300 km/h.

The analysis of normal forces in the systems has shown that the Micro-Deval test is a very dynamic system with two different mechanisms of wear: a slow but constant degradation in the upwards phase and a punctual but strong degradation coming from the impact after the free fall phase of the grains. The same analysis on the track has confirmed the creation of strong chains of grains which support the majority of the load. These chains of forces and the grains surrounding them absorb almost all the energy of the system, being the zones of maximum degradation of ballast.

The analysis of the work produced by friction forces, has confirmed the results above. In the Micro-Deval, the work generated in ballast-ballast contacts is distributed both in the upward movement and in the impact zone, with more or less the same order of magnitude. The contacts between ballast and cylinder generate a big amount of energy and should be carefully treated in a further study. In the track, the maximum work is generated all around the sleeper, especially below it, since the maximum forces and displacements occur in this zone.

The comparison between both systems has demonstrated that the Micro-Deval generates indeed a bigger amount of work per cycle than the track. However, this degradation comes not only from friction between ballast grains but also comes from other mechanisms that are not very representative of what actually happens in the track: impacts after the free fall phase and friction between the grains and the steel drum. In addition, grains in Micro-Deval degrade in a much more homogeneous way than in the track.

The first attempt to detect some families of contacts in the track, using a cumulated-effective displacement analysis, has not yet provided the expected results: almost all the contacts lie in the line D=δ, i.e. contacts with relatively linear trajectories. However, this analysis has been useful to detect some interesting individual contacts that have been therefore studied in order to understand what happens at the micro-scale. A particular contact has been selected for an in-depth analysis due to its high relative displacement and generated work, corresponding to two grains lying just below the sleeper. As expected, relative displacements and normal forces reach the maximum peaks when the cyclic external force is maximal. Furthermore, the studied vertex-face contact generates a scratch of around 0.5 mm over the face throughout two loading cycles, always in a forward movement. This only-forward trajectory could be explained by the short time of study (passage of two bogies).

The continuation of the work is already stablished with the second phase of the project: experimental tests will be performed in the Micro-Deval and the BCR3D in order to compare and link the numerical results with the experimental data. Besides, other simulations should be performed as well: longer simulations, a tamping operation and/or other reproducible tests in order to enrich the available data. Moreover, other wear models should be investigated to complement Archard’s model, especially those including wear produced by impact.

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