

The production of simulations

*A Study of the algorithms and methods used in the development of modern computer simulations*



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Introduction

Arguably the most valuable invention in the modern age is the personal computer. Its intense processing power and ability to follow instructions at nigh-instantaneous speeds makes it useful tool in workplace and home environments. Despite these incredible powers, current computers are merely an object, a device used by humanity to achieve their goals, but what if we were to change that? What if we were to give the computer the ability to think? the ability to solve more abstract problems once thought reserved for human minds.

Obviously with modern technology the idea of creating a thinking computer is preposterous. However, humanity has discovered a way around this problem, using complex algorithms to produce results that *mimic* those that would be given by a human mind; In other words, a simulation.

In this document I shall be detailing my endeavour to create my own simulation, one which simulates a history of a randomly generated world, with its own religions, countries, cities and culture.

Research

Before the project can even begin, intense research on existing simulations must be done to decide how the program will function and what methods need to be developed in order to meet the finish product, to do this I consulted two main sources; John Conway’s Game of life, and Cary Huang’s Evolution simulator.

John Conway’s Game of life is an interesting idea. Officially classified as a ‘zero-player’ game it presents a simple simulation of ‘life’ that abide by specific rules to survive. The presentation of Conway’s game of life is a grid, in which each square is able to be given two values; Dead or Alive. After the starting grid has been input, the program will then follow the following rules [1];

* Living cells with less than two living neighbours become dead cells each generation
* Living cells with two or three neighbours survive in the same grid space they originally inhabit
* Living cells with four or more neighbours becomes a dead cell
* Dead cells with three living neighbours become living cells

While the rules seem simple enough, the actual result of these rules is incredibly interesting, as structures can (and almost always will) form by correct patterns of cells being formed, essentially creating randomly generated machinery, some of the more interesting ones have been listed below [2]:

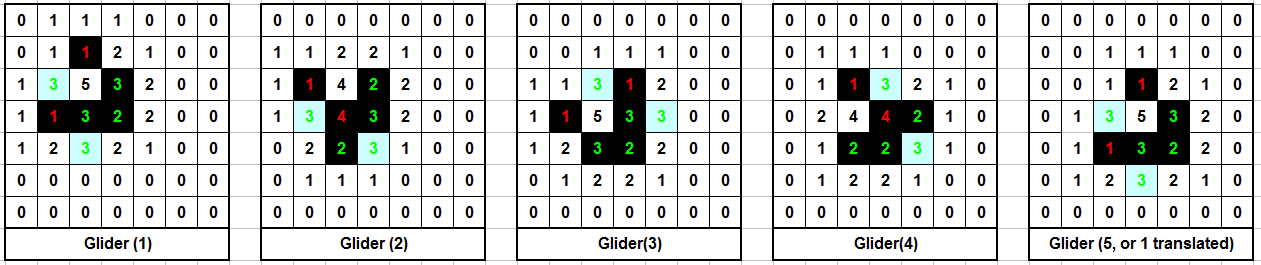
*Block* –

This structure is unable to die unless third parties interact with it, the fact that all of its cells have two living neighbours means that the structure can neither die nor reproduce, and if it isn’t interacted with, it will stay this way eternally.

*Blinker* –

Like its distant brother, the block, without outside interaction a blinker is able to survive forever. However, unlike the block, the blinker has two main forms which it cycles between each generation, forming a ‘blinking’ line which rapidly switches between lying horizontally and vertically. The reason this occurs is because of the fact that while the centre cell will always have two neighbours, the outside cells only have one neighbour, causing them to die each generation, additionally, the cells north/south or east/west of the centre block will always have three neighbours, prompting them to becoming living and repeat the cycle.

*Glider* –

Jumping incredibly far ahead in terms of simplicity, we next have the glider, named as such for its ability to move diagonally eternally, this occurs because the shape is able to replicate itself over 5 generations with one lower x and y value than previously, essentially meaning the shape has transformed by one x and one y.

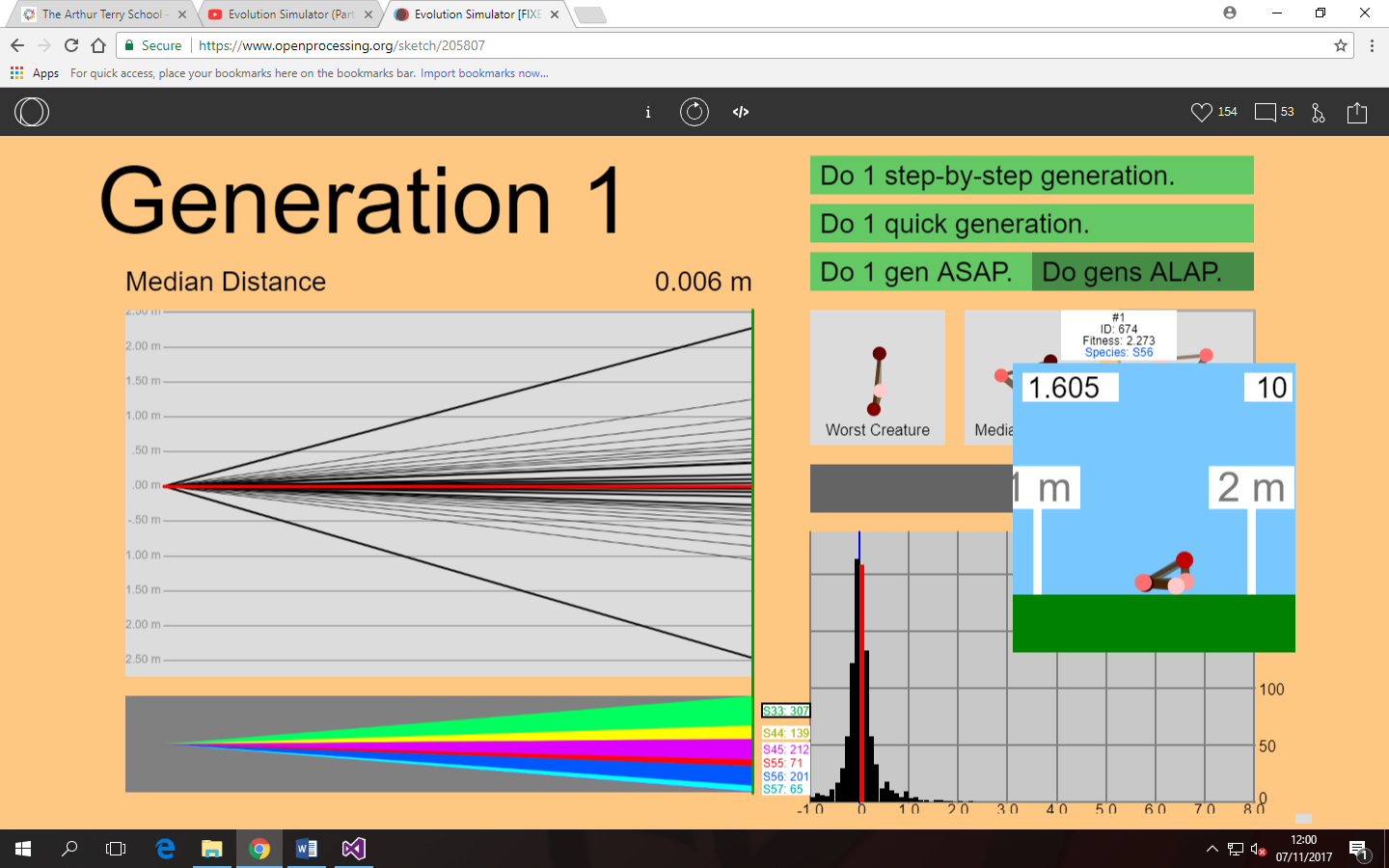
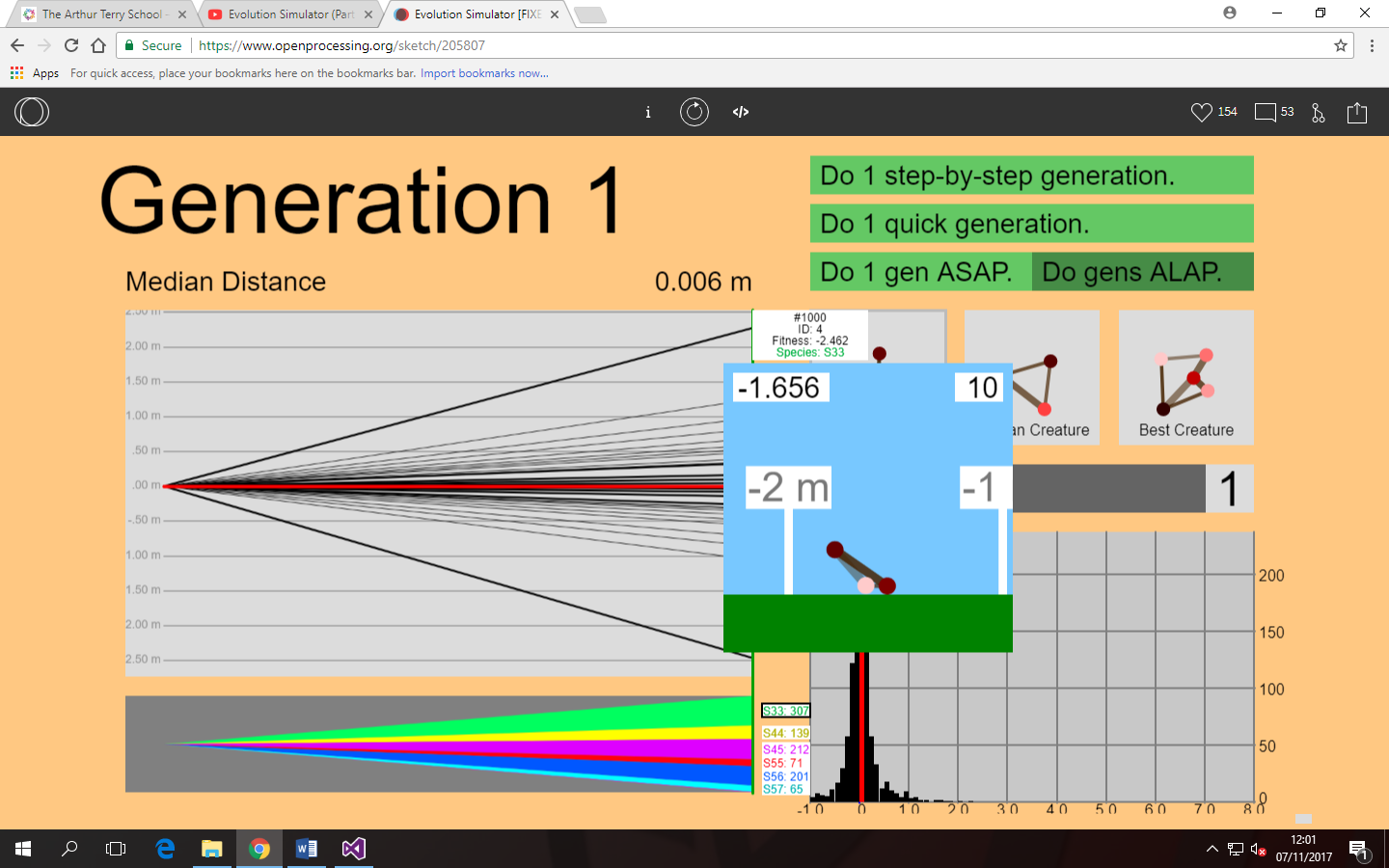
Conway’s game of life is interesting not because of its ability to realistically simulate a mind, but rather as a demonstration of how simple rules can forge a universe of possibilities, as shown by the randomly generated structures which abuse the rules of the game to their advantage. This idea interests me greatly, and a similar concept is incorporated into my next article of research;

*Cary Huangs Evolution Simulator*

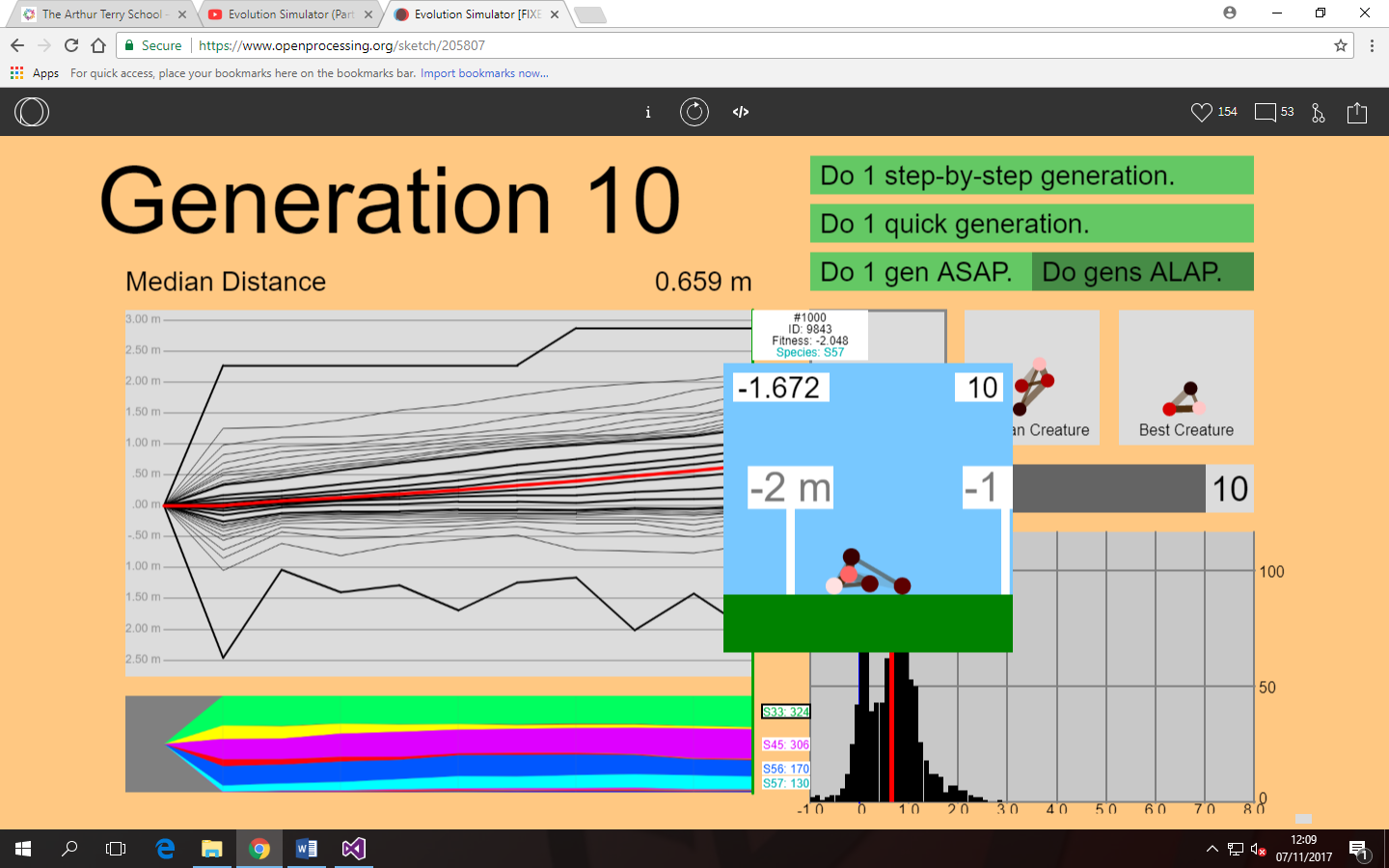
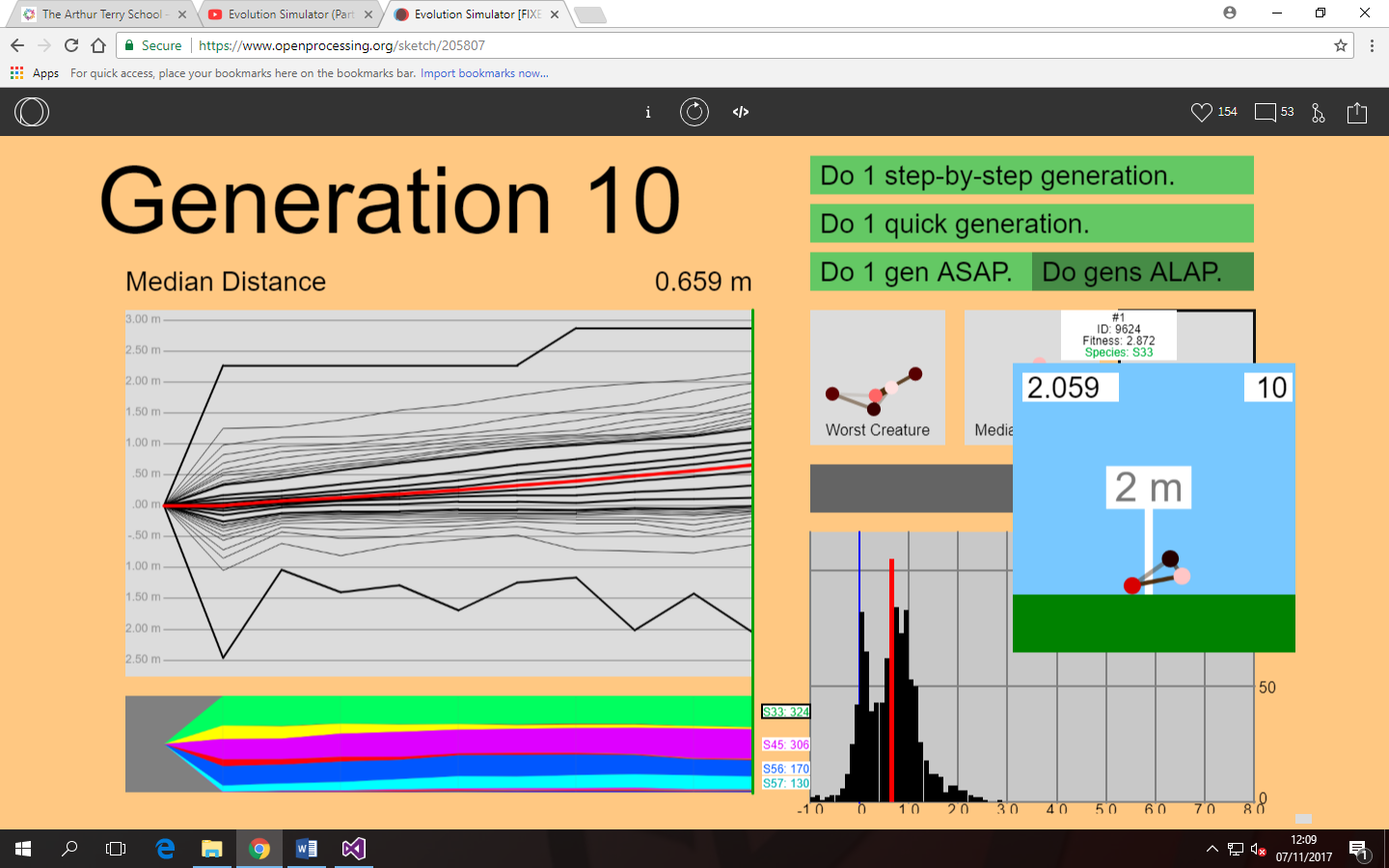
Allowing a computer to create its own structures based on specific rules is certainly an intriguing idea, but it lacks use. Conway’s ‘life’ serves no purpose other than to survive, meaning it is not a particularly good simulation of real concepts. So what if we were to use concepts discussed in Conway’s model for a more practical model, say a model of evolution?

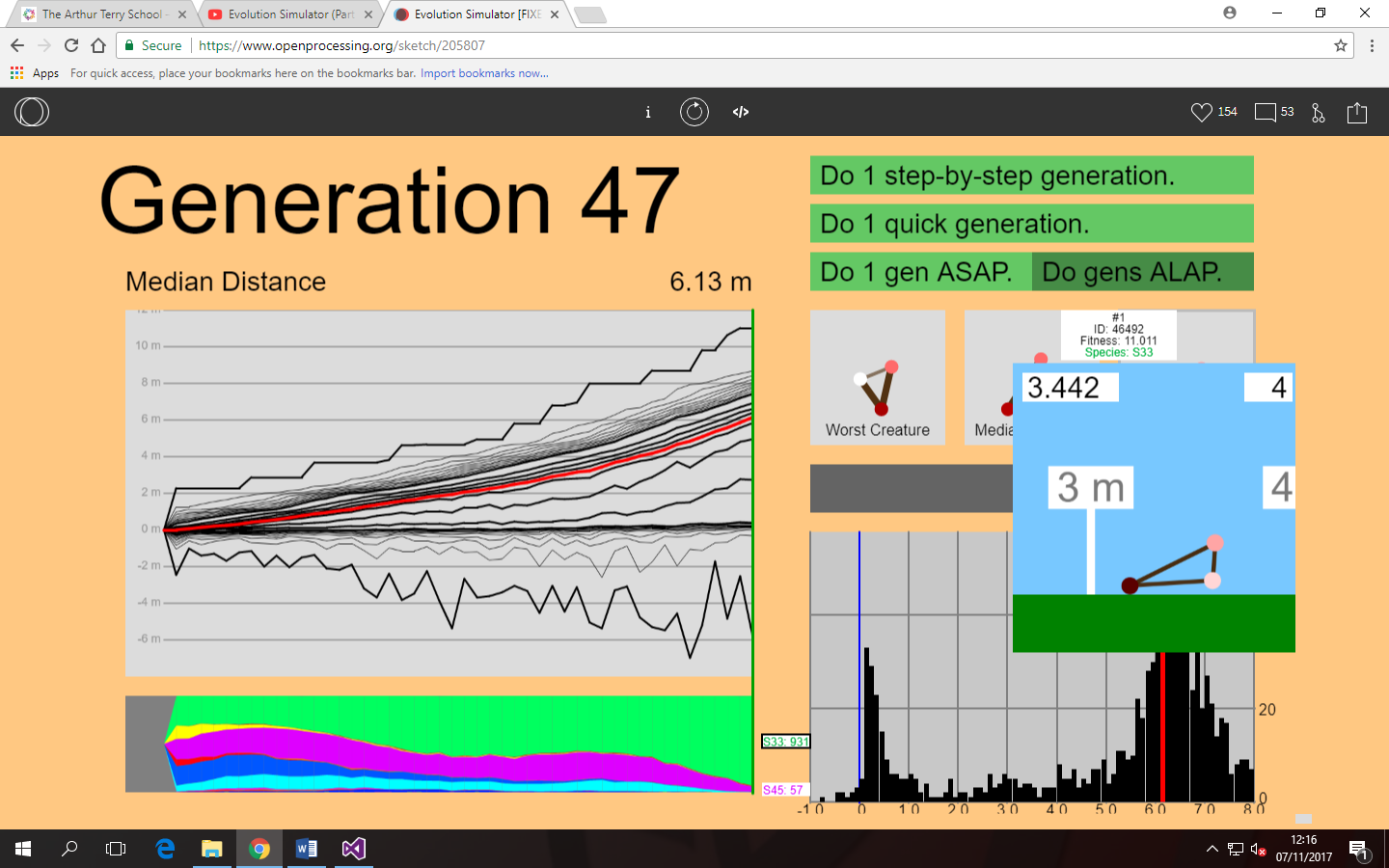
This is where Cary Huang’s Evolution Simulator[4] comes in, in essence it attempts to simulate a population of shapes as they evolve to reach a specific purpose; the ability to travel as far right as possible within fifteen seconds. While Cary goes over his simulator in a lot of detail in his video series on this project[3] the basics are as such:

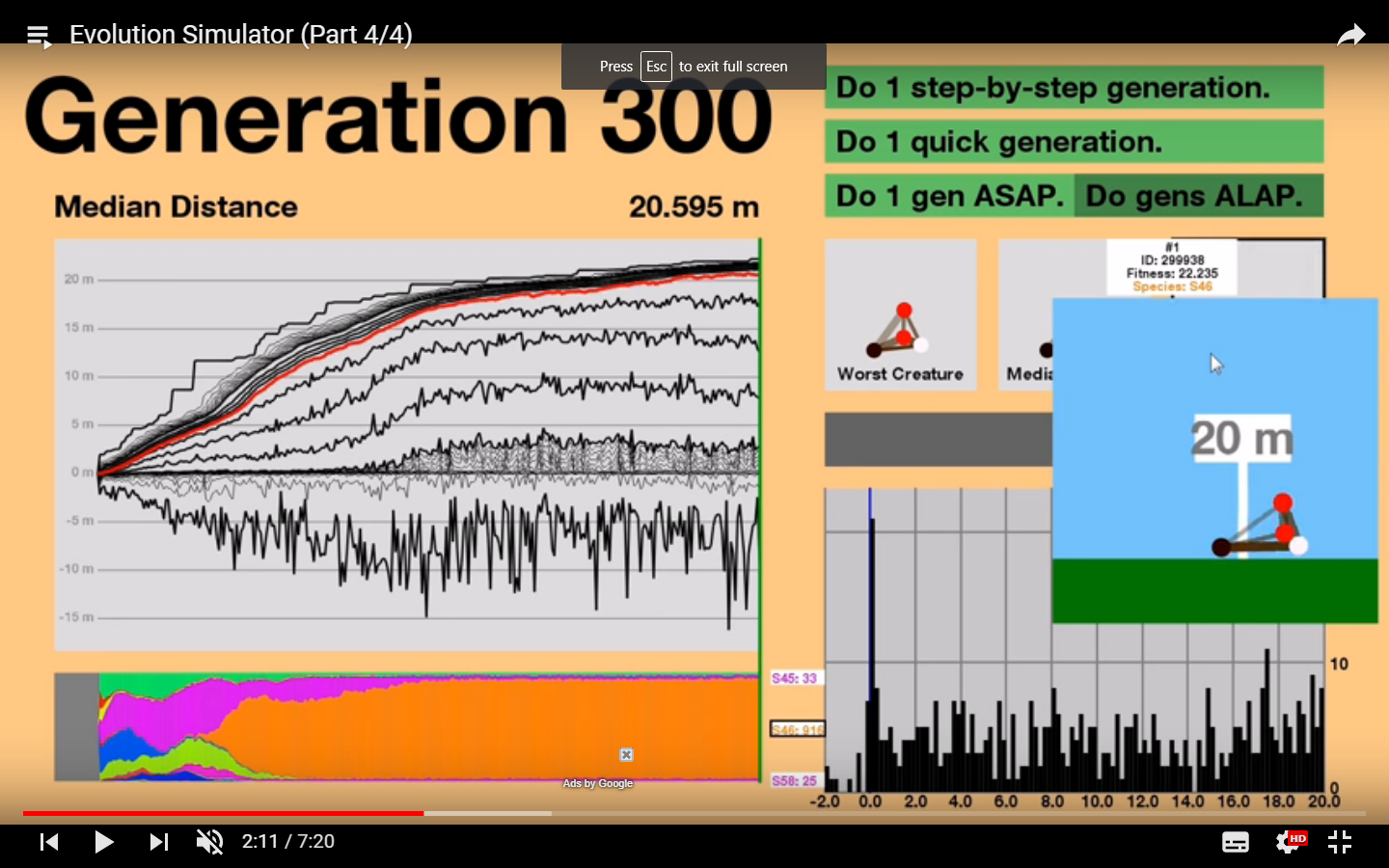
Each ‘creature’ consists of nodes and muscles, the nodes are represented by circles that use the colour red to represent friction (White circles have low friction, red circles have medium friction, whereas black circles have high friction). Muscles are used to bridge gaps between these nodes and have specific contraction and expansion lengths, which it will alternate between slowly over a period of time specified by the strength of a muscle (which is represented by the transparency of a muscle, low strength muscles will be transparent and will have a lower expansion/contraction length due to it being unable to reach a greater length within its allotted expansion/contraction time. On the flip side, a muscle with a high strength will be opaque, and will be able to reach further distances due to its ability to expand/contract more in its allotted time)

From these rules, one thousand unique ‘creatures’ will be created, each with different positions for nodes, different node frictions etc. These creatures will then be timed, and the top 500 shapes that moved the most to the right survive to the next generation, duplicating themselves (with a chance for mutations) to replace the 500 shapes that were unable to place within the top 500 for movement.

In the images to the right, you can see how within ten seconds, the worst creature was able to move 1.6m to the left, whereas the best creature was able to move 1.6m right, allowing it to reproduce into other creatures, which will eventually overtake it due to mutations, forming a shape which is even faster than itself. The worst creature will be removed from the gene pool, meaning its traits which hinder its abilities to move right will not be passed down to the next generation.

Jumping forward ten generations, the effect of these changes to the gene pool can be seen clearly, with the average distance achieved by the creatures increasing by almost 0.6m. Additionally, we can see that the best creature in generation 1 has passed on its traits to the best creature in generation 10, with it having a similar shape but a mutation in the form of the removal of a node present within the generation 1 version that only served to slow the creature down. It is also important to note that in this early generation, the worst creature still moves left, an issue that will no doubt be removed in following generations.

Almost 30 generations later, while the issue of creatures moving left has not been fully removed, the average creature is able to move 6m within 15 seconds, a large increase from its original, which had a best of 2.2m. The best creature in this generation is able to move almost 11m within that time, signifying a clear progression of the species since its early generations. It should also be noted that the best creature has inherited the triangle shape from its ancestor, which is likely the cause of its ability to move at such fast speeds. The triangle shape is able to move so quickly due to the way its nodes work in conjunction, as the top right node will drag the bottom left node off the ground, forcing the bottom muscle to pull the bottom right node towards the bottom left node, effectively demonstrating movement.

This basic structure can be seen within the programmer’s demonstration of his own program, in which after 300 generations, a modified triangle formed which was able to move 22 meters. Notable advantages this creature had over the one I generated includes the low friction in the bottom right node, which allows it to push itself forwards easily, it also includes a counterweight within the centre of the triangle, which pulls the bottom left node quicker than the top right node, essentially decreasing the delay between the bottom right node being risen from the ground (to move right) and it reaching the ground again. This allows this cycle to repeat more times per second, and as this mechanism is used to move the creature, the more of this mechanism that can be performed per second, the faster the creature can move.

While these two simulations have little relevance to the actual theme or concept of my project, they represent a fundamental theory behind simulations. While my history program will not incorporate things like the mutation of limbs, the idea of artificial intelligence attempting to use the means at its disposal to overcome the rules set out by the program and come out on top is a central idea present within my simulations; after all, the main focus is to see how history would go in an alternate world where almost everything is new, and more specifically which countries would come out on top.

Development Diary & Further Research

*World Generation*

When attempting to tackle the creation of an alternate world, the obvious place to start is in the world itself. World generation took arguably the most time out of any part of the programs development, as I decided such a present part of the program had to be as close to perfect as possible, after all, it is the part of the program that will be viewed the most, and therefore needs to look somewhat realistic. To achieve a realistic world map, I attempted multiple methods of generation, including:

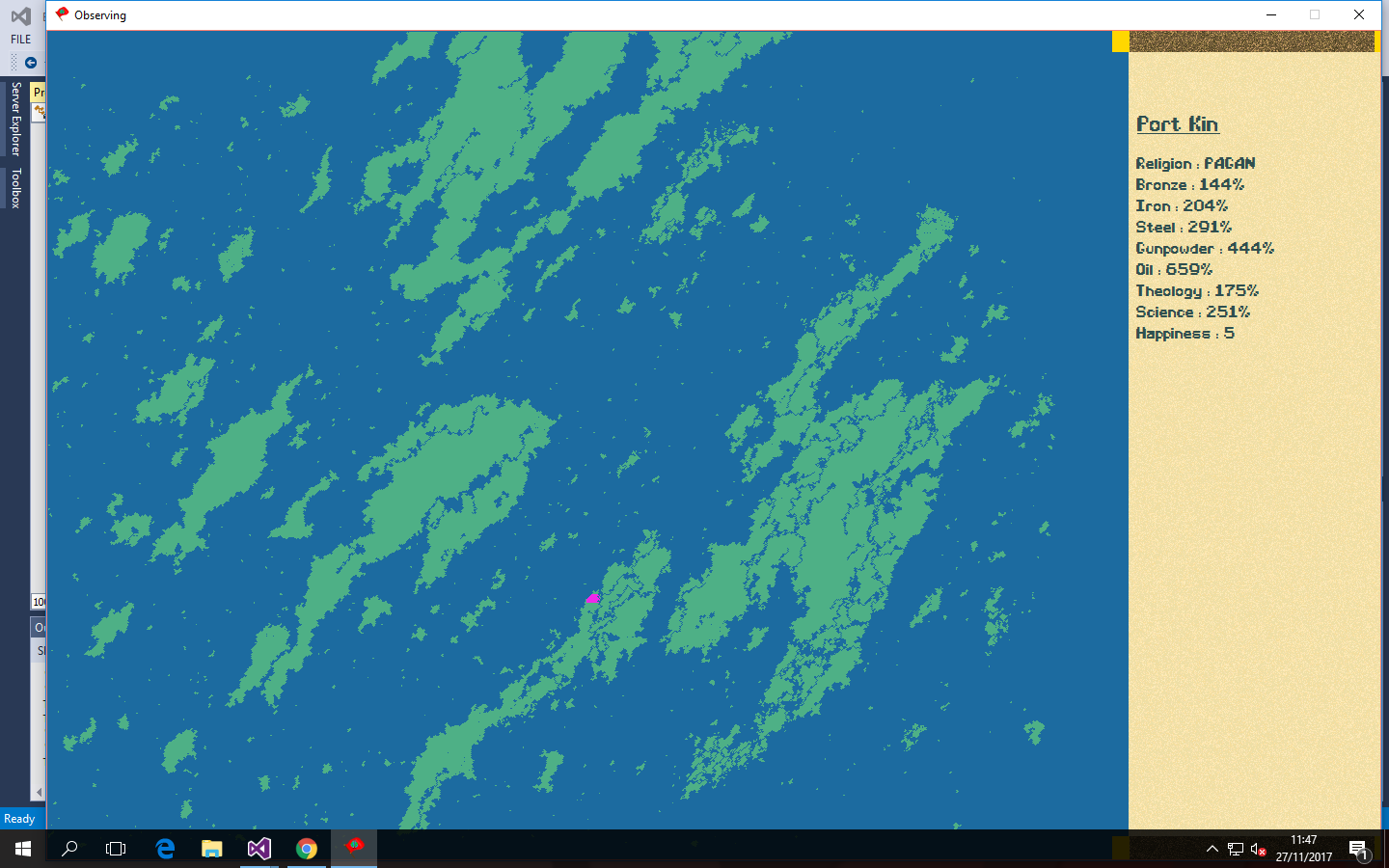
*Snake Method*

The first method I used was a recycled algorithm from an old program I worked on, which I named the ‘snake method’. The concept of the snake method involved a single dark green square being selected on a grid, and choosing an adjacent square to move to each ‘turn’ randomly, this developed a line of dark green pixels, which I would then use to place three light green pixels in each adjacent direction, forming an island that had a seemingly random shape, fit with small bumps and indents that could be found on real islands. While this algorithm was no doubt functional and realistic, its problem came in the form of its implementation. The program I had originally developed it for used a 250x250 grid, whereas the program I was currently working on was 1000x1000. This meant that even when the algorithm was given large amounts of ‘turns’ it would only generate small islands, meaning the (already fairly slow) algorithm would have to be repeated many times over to achieve a realistic world map. After a week of attempting to implement this algorithm successfully, I eventually moved onto a new, more suited algorithm.

*Flood Method*

If you were to take all the water out of the ocean and look at the world, it would look like a barren desert of mountains and hills, this new world would obviously look somewhat similar to the real world, after all topographical maps would still show the distinct shapes of islands and continents among all the sand. If you were to fill in this theoretical world with water, eventually you would reach a point where it once again looked identical to our world, and this was the concept I used when developing the flood method. The flood method would generate a large topographical map, choosing single pixels to represent mountain tops and then slowly filling in its adjacent tiles with slightly lower down pixels. This, in theory, would eventually generate a large map with distinctive island shapes, which could be slowly filled with water (by replacing each pixel with water tiles in order of lowest depth until the water to earth ratio resembled our world) to create a realistic map. This algorithm failed spectacularly, making square shapes and unrealistic cliff faces that split continents in two. While this algorithm had to be completely scrapped, the semi-realistic method of island creation influenced my next (and final) idea greatly.

*Pangaea method*

This algorithm began with a large circle spanning approximately 20% of the maps surface. From there, the circumference would be replaced with red pixels, which would move randomly to adjacent tiles, replacing its former tile with ocean. If these red pixels couldn’t move, they would randomly place themselves in a new coordinate (which could be ocean or land, if it was ocean the red pixel would simply disappear) and attempt to pursue their purpose once again. From there, the program would wait until all the pixels had died out or split up the circle enough to form continents, these continents would then be sorted by connection, and randomly placed around the world, forming large continents and small islands. Out of all the methods I formulated for the task of generating a map, this was by far my favourite, after all, it was decently quick, looked somewhat realistic, and was based off the real concept of continental drift. Because of the advantages this method presented, I decided to use it as my final world generation method.

An example of a map generated using this method, including a selected province.

*Naming*

After the world was finally done, it needed to be populated by humans. These humans would go about the same process as our real ancestors, forming languages, religions and cultures unique to their environment, but this posed a problem; How would I achieve this? Creating new words for these places, people and ideas isn’t something you can do completely randomly, if these new words were simply generated from a group of letters, the output would be strange incomprehensible phrases. For my program, I wanted to keep the idea of random names, but have them based on real naming conventions, essentially creating words that sound like their real world counterparts.

When researching this concept, I came across the mathematical function known as ‘Markov’s chain’[5], which from my understanding seemed to find the occurrence of letters following another letter within a database, and randomly generate letters based on the chance it would follow its previous letter (e.g. the letter e might follow the letter a more often than the letter u does, meaning the letter e would have a higher chance to appear following the letter a). While this concept was incredible in its realism, actual implementations of Markov’s chain into c# took multiple files and generally were too complicated for me to use successfully. Because of this, I decided upon a new algorithm based off Markov’s existing algorithm. The idea of this algorithm was that it would randomly select a word in a database, and choose a few letters from this word, it would then find the next time the last letter it took appears in the exact position of its original, I would then take some letters from this word, and string them onto the end of the previously pulled letters. This cycle would repeat until eventually it would either lose the ability to find new letters (due to excessive length) or a random generator would end the process prematurely, outputting the incomplete word.

Game Theory

Now that the basics were complete, I was able to begin the development of the actual simulation. This posed problem after problem, however, mostly concerning the actions of the artificial intelligence; My intention was to create artificial intelligence that would act similarly to a real human, however since the AI can only act in response to pre-written questions, I needed to develop the algorithms used to impose these questions to formulate a more realistic response.

*War & Harmonic Series*

War is very hard to generalise. Many factors can play into its outcome, most which are unpredictable, so how would one go about developing a way to create an outcome for war based on limited statistics? The only real answer is with a huge amount of mathematical equations and algorithms.

*Sources*

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conway%27s_Game_of_Life#Rules>

[2] Images are from:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conway%27s_Game_of_Life>

<http://www.paleotechnologist.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/glider.png>

[3] Evolution Simulator:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOFws_hhZs8&list=PLrUdxfaFpuuK0rj55Rhc187Tn9vvxck7t>

[4] Evolution Simulator online:

<https://www.openprocessing.org/sketch/205807>

[5] Markovs chain:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Markov\_chain

The Full program can be downloaded from:

<https://github.com/JaVonox/Iron_Age> - To run the program navigate to the save directory + \EmpireSim\Exp2\bin\Debug and run Exp2.exe