Investigating Flood-Fill algorithms for settlement generation using a diagram to dictate its layout.

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# Abstract

With the market and demand for open world video games increasing, the ability to create and prototype settlements for these games in a shorter timeframe has been desired. To retain creative control over the generation, a diagram (bird’s eye view) of the settlement is inputted with different colours representing different sectors. These sectors are then mapped out within multiple data-structures using Flood-Fill algorithms. This dissertation will examine the prototype created and compare the algorithms implemented within in it.

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# Introduction (5% ~400 - 600 words)

In the current landscape of AAA video game releases, there are many that are 3D open-world titles. [1] Such as, Skyrim, Witcher 3, GTA, Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and more. This also includes smaller studios and indie developers. However, the bigger these worlds get, the more manhours is needed. This can result in the now infamous crunch culture, as seen with CD Projeckt Red’s *Cyberpunk2077,* [2] as the game’s scope became so large that on launch day, there were a plethora of bugs and glitches. [3]

This is just one example of the classic “Quantity vs Quality” conflict and one area where this conflict is highlighted in Open World games is in Settlement Generation (e.g. towns, cities and villages). Some developers have dealt with the issue by having randomly created terrain, like in Minecraft’s Villages [4]. Others, researchers have tried to address using Perlin Noise [5], fractals, L-systems, tiling system, Voronoi texture basis [6] [7], and wave function collapse. [8]

A picture containing text, sign

Description automatically generatedBut what if we wanted to, instead of purely random generate settlements, create settlements from a plan/diagram that would add constraints and structure. (Fig. 1) This would allow for Designers to have more control over the world they are creating. The aim here, is hit a middle ground where developers can still create interesting, unique, sensible settlements while also speeding up the process, so not so as many man hours are needed.

Figure 1.1

Furthermore, this addresses a need within smaller/independent video game studios too, who have fewer resources and could be used to quickly prototype and experiment with town layouts.

This project will go beyond existing works by focusing on specifically video game settlement creation. Not attempting to use video game graphical engines to create a city to simulate real world phenomena, [9] or settlement creation in a specific video game and by using a predesigned map to guid the layout of the city not a randomly generated one [6]. I am also personally motivated by this project because I create video games in my own time. [10] Thus, finding a way to lighten possible workloads for myself, and other Game Dev Hobbyists in the future, is exciting!

Over the course of the project I have begun to focus in specifically using Flood-Fill algorithms to map out the sectors of the map. The 3 different Flood-Fill Algorithms (FFAs) that were used were:

* Four Way [Stack-Based Recursion] (4W).
* Walk-Based Filling [Fixed Memory Method] (WBF).
* Span Filling (SF).

And one algorithm of my own creation: Neighbour Checking (NC).

These models will be comparing in 3 different categories:

* Memory use.
* Initial settlement creation speed.
* Scalability

The reason for choosing variations of the FF algorithm was because FF is designed to determine an area of connected nodes with a matching attribute. It is often used in the File or “Bucket” tool (e.g. Paint, Photoshop, Etc.). [11] This meant that they were easily adapted to produce a data-structure of Vector2 (Coordinates) for each shape on the map.

**How did it turn out? (This will be added once I’ve completed my testing).**

## Original Aims & Objectives

### Objectives

#### Research Settlement Design from 3 different eras of history. ???? (MAYBE DELETE IDK)

Developing an understanding of settlement layouts over the ages will allow me to program for more sensible and realistic city layouts. Furthermore, for the tool to be flexible and useful for many projects is must be able to create settlements from different design styles. The different eras I am thinking of exploring, is a Native American Village, Medieval Town around, and Modern City.

#### Learn and Understand C#’s and 3D Unity Engine’s tools.

It is vital I understand how to use the Unity Engine, and its preferred language C#. This will include how it read in textures, create a flexible key system, and how to load and unload models.

#### Research 4 Flood Fill algorithms.

Develop knowledge and understanding of 4W, WBF, GTF and SF. This will be done by reading pseudocode of each algorithm, and then finding an example of these algorithms implemented.

#### Implement Flood Fill algorithms.

After understanding how a variety of different settlement types are set out, I find the common themes among different the examples of a specific type and have buildings spawned according to those commonalities. This would include from not having buildings spawn over each other, rotating building around curved areas building structures, to moving building around geographical structures (e.g. Rivers).

#### Evaluate results and Test Prototype.

Develop a prototype that allows you to run all 4 algorithms and then test each one of them in the areas listed above. Compare these results and evaluate which circumstances each would be preferable (this could depend on the machine, settlement complexity, etc.).

### How the objective and Aims have Changed

The objective and changed mostly away from the research and understanding of various settlement types (e.g. Modern city, Medieval Town, Native American Camp, etc.) to focusing on FFAs. This was because there was a lack of focus on the technical side of the project and it was veering off to a more into anthropology, geography, and sociology.

## Project Outline

Introduction

*An introduction to the dissertation detailing the motivation, aims, objectives as well as the initial problem.*

Background and Research

*Presents the context and background research done for the project.*

Implementation

*A discussion on what the prototype can do and how I went about implementing the background research into it.*

Results and Evaluation

A section on displaying and analysing the results of each FFA procured from the prototype.

Conclusion

A summary on the fulfilment of objectives, summary of the achievements of the project, development of personal skills, and possible future work.

# Background Technical Material (10% ~800-1200 Words)

This chapter should cover two things in detail:

* A review of existing academic works. Use Google Scholar, identify papers related to the field. Start broad (e.g. procedural generation in general) and then narrow down to your particular topic (e.g. city generation). In particular, state why each paper mentioned is relevant to your project and how it has in influenced your decisions.
* The algorithms and technology used, in detail. If you are implementing an existing algorithm, this is where you describe the algorithm in detail in such a way that a competent programmer could also implement.
* It’s okay to have a few references to games articles, but the bulk should be peer reviewed academic papers (journals and conferences).
* Then summarise the findings of the background chapter, relating to decisions made for your project. You should then refer back to these findings in the Implementation and Evaluation chapters (i.e. when describing implementation decisions, support them by referring back to find from the research, similarly when identifying an evaluation method, or describing specific results, support them with evidence from other people’s research, state that they are different and why that might be).

Find papers on 4 different things:

* Procedural Generation (Broad)
* City Generation
* Flood Fill diagrams
* Urban City Diagrams (sidenote)
* Types of Settlements (sidenote)

Automated world creation is often done through procedural generation which is a method of creating data algorithmically as opposed to manually. This is commonly done through some pseudorandom method, such as Perlin Noise [5] or Wave Function Collapse. [8] [12] Unsurprisingly, this is a very powerful tool within the realm of video games, as it widens the horizon of possibilities for games developers to exercise their creative authority. Whether it be, reactive music [13], unique worlds for each playthrough [14] or inimitable storylines all these things [15] - as Tanya X. Short and Tarn Adams put it:

[Allows] Players [to] have their own personal journey but still have enough common experience to share their tales with others… [16]

When starting out restart, I found the paper *Procedural Content Generation for Games: A Survey* [17] very useful as it gave a very in-depth look into a great swath of procedural generation from particle effects to buildings. One of the things it touched upon was whole city generation which then sparked my curiosity of looking how different algorithms could spawn different, this to talk but *Oskar Stålberg* from *IndieCade Europe 2019* where he discussed how he created organic towns from square tiles using Wave Function Collapse. [18] This showed me that there were ways to create cities that didn’t seem rigid and soulless, which I was worried about. Looking more closely into *Procedural Content Generations for Games: A Survey*, they cited a paper by *George Kelly* and *Hugh McCabe* where they published a survey about multiple different techniques around City Generation. [6] They discussed many techniques such as Fractals, Tilling and the previously mentioned Perlin Noise. However, none of these appealed to me. This was because many of these seemed to be focus purely on modern day cites and weren’t flexible enough to accommodate different city structure types, such as medieval European settlements, which are very popular in the RPG genre, or maybe something even more niche like native American settlements. Furthermore, I didn’t This led my down the path of ways to path of analysing different city types in general [19] which in turn made me rediscover Land Use Models (LUM) which I had learnt about in middle school.

## Land Use Models (LUMs)

Regarding the design of the diagram, it was based of the design of LUM which are abstractions of complex city layouts. However, the simplification of each settlement’s layout varies on the type of LUM used:

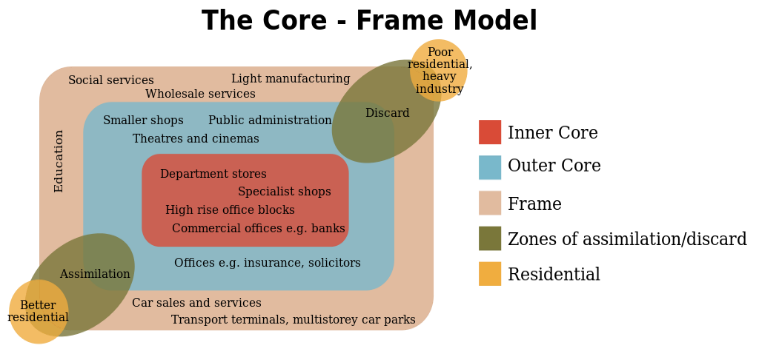
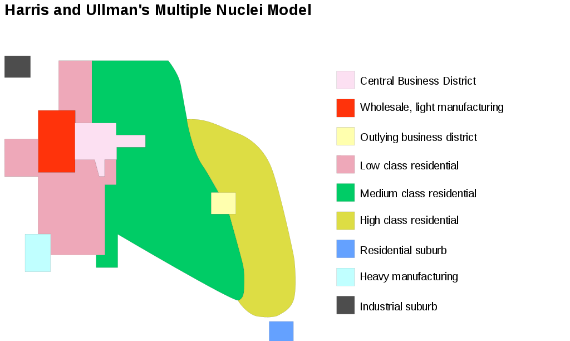
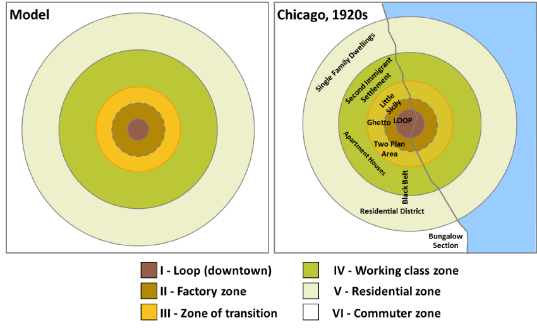
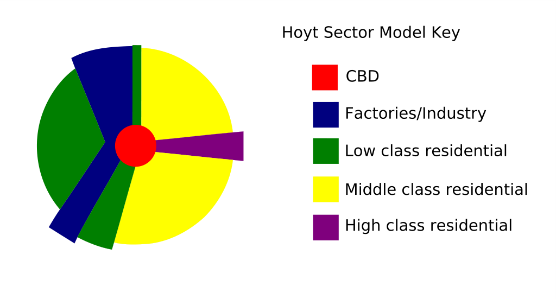
* Concentric Zone / Burgess Model [20] (Figure 2.1) [21]
* Core Frame Model [22] (Figure 2.2) [23]
* Sector/Hoyt Model [24] (Figure 2.3) [25]
* Multiple Nuclei Model [26] (Figure 2.4) [27]

Figure .3

Figure 2.1

Figure .4

Figure 2.2

These models were inspirational in design only and in the end a less abstract approach was taken. (see Figure 1.1) This led to common structures like roads and walls to be manually imputed. Furthermore, the labelling of the sectors and what buildings spawn withing them is up to the digression of the user. If the user wanted, they could use a procedurally generated urban LUM for a more realistic modern day city layout. [28] [29]

In the end, while not technically relevant, this tangent is what inspired me to base my settlement generation of a premade texture, which a level designer could create themselves and then input into the system. They could have different buildings spawn in different areas - effectively creating the different sectors at seen in the LUMs above.

However, as mentioned before, this project now lacked a technical side. Instead of trying to investigate a technical problem and publish results on my findings, I instead was trying to create a product that would be usable by developers in the future. Not exactly what a dissertation in designed for.

Eventually, I landed on examining the used of Flood Fill algorithms. This was because during my time trying to implement my prototype, I needed to find a way to map out each sector (a 2d polygon) into a data structure as a set of coordinates. Flood Fill algorithms – also known as seed fill - are designed to find adjacent pixels of a common characteristic (in this case colour) and only stop until all connected pixel, with that common characteristic, are found. There a many different types of flood fill algorithms and different methods of implementing them. So, I took some of the most well known and adapted them to my software.

## Four Way

One of the earliest flood fill algorithms was detailed in *Principles of Interactive Computer Graphics* by *William Newton* and *Robert F. Sproull* [30] where:

[The] filling operation starts by replacing the value of a single pixel, and then spreads throughout the raster, replacing the value of any pixel that contains the old colo[u]r. The spreading operation stops whenever it encounters a pixel that doesn’t not contain the “old” colo[u]r.

The algorithm spreads by taking examining the adjacent pixels *above, below, left* and *right* of the initial pixel. This can then be either repeated recursively or linearly.

The Pseudo Code has been adapted for this project. But the principles remain the same.

### Recursive Implementation



### Linear Implementation



## Span Filling / Scanline

Span Filling, also referred to as Scanline Fill, is an optimisation of the previous Four Way algorithm. Instead of filling pixel by pixel, it fills a whole scanline.

Initially, it was described by Alvy Ray Smith, who referred to it as Tint Fill, as such:

Tint fill fills along a scanline under the rule that it can never go uphill. It can fill along level ground or downhill only. A scanline segment for tint fill consists of all the pixels proceeding from the seedpoint right (and left), which have the same tint as the seedpoint and a value which is either the same or less than the pixel just left (right). Thus, a scanline segment is a section of a hill or mesa. [31]

A more modern explanation of the algorithm would be such:

Starting with a seed point, the algorithm fills left and right of it until it hits and edge. From this, it will scan the same horizontal areas of the lines above and below, searching for new seed-points to continue the algorithm.

[32]

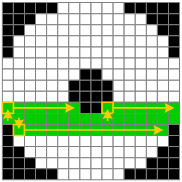
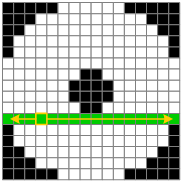


Figure 2. First, filling in horizontally from seed (left picture), then find a new seed in the lines above and below (right picture).



## Painter / Walk Based Filling (Fixed-memory method)

Walk Based Filling, or what I like to refer to as the Painter algorithm, is the most complex algorithm examined in this dissertation. The aim of this method is to uses minimal memory for four-connected regions as described by Dominik Henrich:

[W]e describe algorithms that need little additional memory that is of constant size so that it can be reserved in advance. … Roughly speaking, the global filling strategy is: move around in the region and fill it in such a manner that the region remains connected. [33]

Essentially, from the initial seed point, the cursor moves around the region painting each pixel without painting themselves into a corner, hence, why I refer to it as the Painter algorithm. The cursor only can see the 8 pixels around them and can only move in to the four-connected regions. The cursor follows the “right-hand rule” (RHR), this mean, figuratively, the cursor is always moving in the direction so that there will be an adjacent wall directly on its right. This leads to the cursor finding themselves in one of these conditions:

1. One boundary pixel is filled.
2. Two of the boundary pixels are filled.
3. Three of the boundary pixels are filled/
4. All four boundary pixels are filled.
5. Zero boundary pixel are filled.

Add Images:

All directions are relative to whichever way the cursor is facing.

**Case #1:** Check the front 8-corners (front left and front left) to see whether they are filled or not. If both are empty, then the cursor can continue using RHR. If either or both are filled, then this creates an intersection of multiple paths that cannot be filled, which means if the current pixel was painted that may prohibited the painter from returning and filling the other side of the paths.

To solve this issue, we introduce a “mark” to define where the junction is and which direction the cursor was facing when the mark was placed. After this mark is created to paint move forward according to the RHR while no painting. Once, it reaches either a dead end (all pixels filled apart from the one behind) then the cursor turns around and continues to paint following RHR, if it there is an opening, more than 2 filled pixels, it places another mark and continues following the RHR.

**Case #2:** When encountering a path with only 2 free pixels this could lead to another intersection of multiple paths. Likewise, with #1 if the front 8-corners are filled then it follows the logic set out int Case #1.

Otherwise, a mark is placed for the first 2-pixel boundary to remember where the opening of the passage is and in what direction the painter was moving. If the cursor is encountered again and that cursor is going in the same direction as the mark, then it is safe to paint the square with the mark and to continue in the same direction. Through some unknown path, the pixels on the other side of the mask can be reached, hence it is able to be painted in the future. The mark is then reset.

If the cursor finds itself connecting with a mark different to its current orientation, then a loop of some sort as happened, causing the cursor to return to the mark. This found loop must be removed. The park is reset, and the cursor paints in the direction indicated previously by the mark, now following the “Left-hand Rule” (LHR). The cursor keeps moving forward until an intersection is encountered, with 1 or less filled bounding pixels. Continuing using the LHR, the courser now searches for a pixel with a boundary of two pixels. This then allows for the loop to be broken and the algorithm continues.

**Case #3:** There is only one open path, thus continue painting allowing this paths.

**Case #4:** There are no more pixels to be painted. The cursor paints the pixel it is on and stops the algorithm.

**Case #5:** Move right along the x axis until you find a boarder. Don’t paint until boarder is found.

This was algorithm was first published by Dominik Henrich in 1994. [33]

# Implementation (What was done, and how) (40% ~3200 -4800 words)

## Stack-based Recursive implementation (Four-Way)

### Stack Storage

### Queue Storage

## Walk-Based Filling

## Graph-Theoretic Filling

## Span Filling

## Neighbour Checking Algorithm

# Results and Evaulation (30% ~2400 – 3600 Words)

# Conclusion (10% ~800 – 1200 Words)

# Form/References (5%)

# References

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