**ZEN ROUTING**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Abstract

Zen Routing

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Driving induced stress is a problem inherent to contemporary living in urban areas. Traffic congestion, route unpredictability, and other factors cause undue stress to commuters daily. This project’s purpose is to alleviate driving related stress by offering alternative “Zen” routes. This service will be provided in the form of a web application.  Currently, navigational apps provide options based on shortest estimated time of arrival or shortest distance. The planned application will analyze a number of other factors to suggest routes that are comparable in time to the fastest route, but are less stressful. The ideal “Zen” route will be determined by applying Dijkstra’s shortest path algorithm to a directed roadway graph. Stress related characteristics will be incorporated into this process by defining network edge weights as a scaled sum of roadway factors. The way in which each roadway factor contributes to the final route decision will be learned through user feedback. In the end, this method of routing will incentivize people to take alternative routes based on the benefits of stress reduction. The overall benefit to the user will hopefully take form in increased driving safety and overall well-being.

Chapter i

introduction

Motivations

Commuting and driving in general are a major cause of stress to many people. The extent to which this stress affects our health goes relatively unnoticed. New reports from several sources expound on the effects of driving related stress. One report from the U.K.’s Office of National Statistics shows that individuals who have long commutes report higher levels of anxiety and lower life satisfaction as compared to short distance commuters [1]. The point being that the longer you spend driving under stressful conditions, the higher the cost. The long distance nature of an individual’s commute cannot be alleviated by a routing application; however, the driving environment and path taken can be improved. The choice of a route can become a deciding factor in the driver’s overall commute experience.

As pointed out in past studies, specific route factors affect drivers’ stress. These factors are generalized into the concepts of personal control and commute predictability [2]. Situations such as traffic jams and congestion due to construction are examples which fall partially into both categories. Because these occurrences are somewhat unpredictable, drivers become frustrated when their commutes are lengthened or made more stressful due to an unforeseen change. Additionally, stress can become further elevated when drivers have limited options in these situations. They may become stuck on the highway in the middle of high congestion with no way to exit or change their current situation.

The proposed “Zen” approach to routing takes advantage of the stress-related factors put forth above. Routes can be analyzed for specific, measurable characteristics. Such characteristics include: high vehicle congestion, presence of construction, and stop-go traffic behavior. Routes with these characteristics will be avoided. Instead, the route chosen will exhibit inverse characteristics that should reduce driving stress. These characteristics may include: low traffic volume and route time predictability. The approach to traffic routing presented herein is currently unavailable via existing services, and it is progressive in its perspective on driving. The hope is that an application which focuses on driving stress reduction will lead to better driving experiences and will change individuals’ viewpoint on navigation.

Technical Background

Before diving into the project framework, there are several terms and concepts used in this thesis which may seem foreign to readers of various technical backgrounds. In order to mitigate this issue, they are introduced here for accessibility:

Network Graph

Mathematical tool used to model pairwise relations between objects. A network graph consists of nodes and edges. An edge can be seen as the connection between two unique nodes. Each edge is usually assigned a value or weight which models the system in question. Beyond edges and nodes, a network graph has a number of important characteristics including: connectedness and directivity. Connectedness describes the degree to which either node pairs or the network graph as a whole are connected. Directivity describes whether or not graph edges have an associated direction. In the context of the project presented, a city map is modeled as a network graph with streets modeled as edges and intersections modeled as nodes.

Shortest Path Algorithm

Given a network graph and two nodes of interest, a shortest path algorithm quickly determines the shortest path between these two nodes. Shortest path in this context is usually defined as the path that connects the two desired nodes and minimizes the sum of the edge values or weights along the path. In the context of the project presented, the shortest path algorithm is used to find the optimal “Zen” route.

GoogleMaps API Set

An Application Program Interface or API, is a set of routines which enables access to a built code library or data set. In the context of the project presented, the API sets are provided by Google. Furthermore, these API sets are utilized to access real-time traffic data such as road congestion and accident presence.

“Zen-ness”

This term was coined by the project researchers in order to describe the overall stress-related character of a route or roadway. A path which possesses a good “Zen” score is considered pleasant to the driver; in contrast, a path which possesses a bad “Zen” score is considered stressful. The way in which this abstract idea of “Zen-ness” was defined mathematically is detailed in the coming sections.

Theoretical Framework

Primary Goals

In order to approach the project goal of stress-sensitive traffic routing, three primary components are required. I) A framework for describing roadways and intersections. II) A mathematical model for evaluating the stress-related characteristics of a route. III) A method for selecting the optimal route. With these objectives in mind, simple yet powerful mathematical descriptions were chosen by the research team. For the first objective, a directed network graph structure was used in order to describe a city’s traffic network. Within this scheme, the network graph *edges* represent the roadways while the graph *nodes* represent the intersections. Additionally, each *edge* has a numerical *weight* which describes a road segment’s features (distance is one example). For the second objective listed, a mathematical metric was developed and termed as a route’s “*Zen-ness”*. The form of this metric translates a road segment’s stress-related features into a quantified number.

Shortest Time Traffic Routing

Before describing how stress-factors or *“Zen-ness”* can be incorporated into a routing decision, it is instructive to explain how more common routing is accomplished. Such routing finds the fastest path between two desired locations. Given a directed network graph which describes a set of roads through *edges, nodes,* and *weights,* one can find an optimal route using the shortest path algorithm. This method quickly finds the shortest path between any two connected nodes in a network. The shortest path is defined as a list of connected edges which links the two given nodes (A and B for example) and minimizes the sum of weights along the path. In the case of time minimization, the sum of weights describes the time spent driving along the chosen path. So, by this method, the fastest route is achieved.

“Zen” Traffic Routing

So, how can stress-related features be incorporated into this method? The technique utilized is very straightforward. In order to account for stress within the shortest path algorithm, part of an edge’s weight must come from the edge’s stress-related factors. This idea is described mathematically as a scaled sum of factors. The overall weight of an edge is now a sum of factors which are each scaled by their corresponding factor weight. The overloaded use of the word “weight” here is confusing so a mathematical formula is provided:

So, more specifically, what are these factors and what are their corresponding factor weights? In the context of this project, the factors primarily considered are route time and route stress. Each of these components is an important consideration in the routing process. Furthermore, both come with a defined factor weight. The factor weight’s purpose is to control how strongly it is considered in the routing decision. In order to illustrate this point, an example is instructive:

Figure (1) Shortest Path Algorithm Illustrated

Chapter ii

methods

Framework Rationalization

Multiobjective Path Optimization

The problem of selecting the optimal “Zen” route is a problem of constrained optimization. Over the path choice space, the best route is one which optimizes a defined objective function while satisfying all necessary constraints. In this case, the definition of optimization constraints is quite simple while the choice of objective function is not. The only constraint for this problem is that the path chosen must connect the source and destination nodes. To choose an objective function, all factors of interest must be considered. In this context, the objective function is related to the path’s total distance and “Zen-ness.” The chosen objective function for the project is very common: a weighted sum of factors. This definition is very intuitive. Each factor contributes to the overall objective through summation while the factor weights dictate the degree of contribution. Essentially, the factor weights determine which factor is prioritized in the decision process.

Zen Scoring

In order to measure the stress-related nature of a roadway segment, a simple, composite metric was devised and termed as the road’s “Zen” score. The metric takes several values as input to generate a single calculated number. The metric is defined for each road segment as follows:

Within this formula, there are several quantities of interest: the current time, base time, and segment distance. The current time is the expected time to drive along a segment *with* current roadway traffic levels accounted for. The base time is the expected time to drive along a segment *without* traffic. Thus, the difference between these two values describes the added time due to traffic. This difference is divided by the base time because the ratio of traffic time to base time is more indicative than the traffic time alone. The logarithmic form was chosen due to the metric’s tie to humanity. Internal human perception of various external stimuli has been found to loosely follow a logarithmic form [5]. By mapping “Zen” scores in this way, the metric better fits human perception of traffic. The last input to the metric, segment distance, is multiplied to account for the distance over which the traffic congestion occurs.

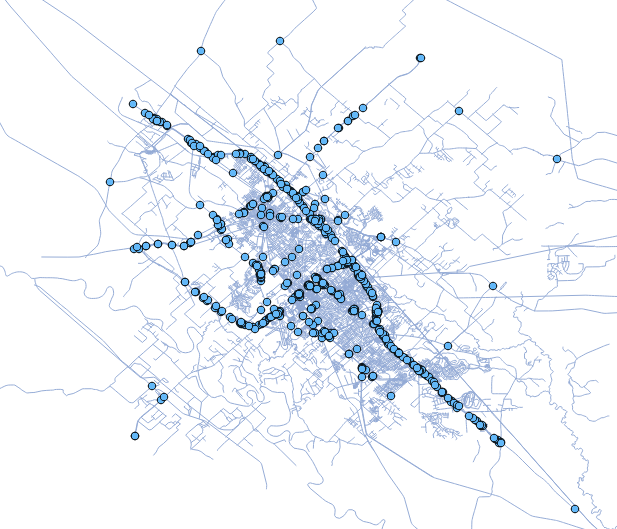
Data Extraction

A significant portion of the project methods were guided by the limitations of data availability. In order to extract real-time traffic information, standard Google Maps API services were utilized. Understandably, the amount of information provided by Google is limited in nature. The Directions API service allows a client to acquire the expected travel time between two nodes based on current or future traffic conditions. The number of these API requests is limited to a daily quota of 2500 free queries. This limitation led to several key project decisions. First, a reduction in the overall network graph structure was conducted (the details of this reduction are outlined in the next section). Second, scripts were written in order to utilize multiple API keys for testing. Access to the API services is tracked by Google through the use of an identifying developer key. Thus, by using multiple registered keys, access to API server queries was increased.

Network Reduction

To accommodate the limited access to real-time traffic data, the analyzed network graph was reduced to its most essential edges. Two different methods were utilized to achieve this reduction. The first method used the pre-defined structure of the roadway data provided by OpenStreetMap (OSM). This open license map service provides geodata such as street coordinates which were used to generate the original network graph. Additionally, OSM provides identifiers for each road segment. As an example, highways are given a unique tag which is distinct from the tag assigned to residential sections. By removing road segments based on tag information, the network was reduced from approx. 5000 nodes to only 500, as demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure (2) Reduced Network Graph:



Chapter III

Results

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Chapter IV

Conclusion

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Appendix (THIS PAGE IS optional)

1. Code Platform: Python / Networkx / OSM