

**Honours Project - MHW225671**

**INTERIM REPORT**

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**Department of Computing**

**Submitted for the Degree of: Computer Games (Software Development)**

**BSc Computing**

**BSc ITMB**

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**Project Title: Voxels place within games.**

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**“Except where explicitly stated, all work in this report, is my own original work and has not been submitted elsewhere in fulfilment of the requirement of this or any other award”.**

**Signed by Student: Date:**

## Introduction

Polygons are accepted as the current standard geometric primitive for both the 3D Modelling and Video Games industries; they can be defined as any closed 2D shape made of entirely straight lines. Current GPU manufacturers and tech giants have heavily invested into polygons, originating back to the late 1990s when the term was popularized by the GeForce 256 GPU. (TheBat!, 2023) This can be ascribed to their simplicity and efficiency with the many rasterization techniques at that time. However, their most prominent drawback is within its ‘*imitation*’ of real-world objects, as many techniques are only aesthetically, and not physically simulating the mesh. This is more specifically seen in games within the 3D dissection of polygonal models at runtime, where the model holds no data for the new face required to be created.

A suggested alternative, Voxels; also known as volumetric pixels; are a geometric primitive holding data for the entire model, including what cannot be seen. This primitive is used to represent values in three-dimensional space on a grid. Voxels function similarly to physical particles, therefore creating a more sophisticated implementation used to imitate the real world. Often, Voxels are referred to as 3D pixels and have a wide use in Procedural Generation, Particle Simulation, and Destructible Physics. Voxels are uniquely stored within a grid, allowing efficient usage of Object-Oriented Programming (OOP) and the Entity Component System (ECS), allowing each voxel to hold a unique property. This is shown within the 3D voxel game ‘*MakeFarm*’ by David Szymon Grobert, as each block held a definition for if its object was breakable, and if so, what item should be dropped. (GROBERT, 2023)

Polygons have held their position as the standard geometric primitive in many of the 3D visualization industries for over 20 years. This has resulted in many of the competing primitives to fall behind, as new technologies advance polygons forward. Many rendering practices for these primitives require the conversion of their structures into polygons, a major of which being the Marching Cubes algorithm. (Lorenson & Cline, 1987) Most previous rendering techniques for mainstream geometric primitives are insufficient for modern day usage, as researchers are now aiming to create greater realism. Due to the observation that is Moore’s law, which dictates that the number of transistors within computer chips double every two years, graphics are no longer restricted by our hardware, but by our software approach. A common implementation includes Ray Tracing, a method of emulating the light reflections and refractions of the real world. Ray Tracing is entirely possible within Voxels, although a similar process named Ray Marching is generally used, however, both of which do not require the need to convert to a polygonal mesh. These techniques potentially creating a new use case for Voxels, with the possibility of gaining a wider acceptance as an alternative to polygons. The improved graphics that come with Ray techniques leads way into the necessity for Particle Simulation and Destructible Objects, creating a greater sense of realism, and both of which voxels are suited towards.

Atomontage, a leader in voxel development with a 13-year running micro-voxel engine, are consistently pushing the boundaries of voxel development forward. Atomontage are known for their usage of projection based voxelization, soft-body dynamics and their voxel editor’s recent open beta launch in 2021. (Atomontage, 2023) Daniel Tabar, and Branislav Siles, the founders of Atomontage, shared that the future of voxels lies within cloud services, as with their current implementation, the voxels are relatively inexpensive on both the view, and the server. The future of Atomontage aims to revolutionize both the cloud gaming industry, and the interactive sandbox games genre, and Daniel Tabar has stated that their engine could be compared to “*Roblox + Minecraft + a higher resolution*”. (JTVentures, 2023)

Atomontage is not only invested within the games industry, but also has ties to medicine from one of its most supportive angel investors, Tommy Palm (Siles, 2019). Voxel-based 3D visualization is an incredibly large sector within medicine, with competing software such as ‘*3D Slicer*’, ‘*Voxel-Man ENT*’ and ‘*SolidWorks 3D-Doctor*’. These provides a multitude of tools ranging from CT Lung Analysis to Virtual Training Simulators, all of which involve intensive usage of volumetric data. The usage of voxels within medicine comes from the necessity of creating not only a realistic model, but also for accurate mapping of different tissue types (Slicer Community, 2023) (Voxel-Man, 2023) (Dassault Systemes, 2023) As voxel techniques are researched, these software could potentially receive updates allowing more realistic, and accurate models for its users. A study within the effect of Field-Of-View and Visual Realism on virtual training tasks found that visual realism may impact the virtual training performance negatively, it impacts the real-life assessment positively. (Ragan, et al., 2015) This suggests that if voxels gain more realistic rendering techniques, that it could positively impact training procedures for users of Medical Simulations.

The games industry is at the forefront of voxel realism development, a recent voxel success story includes Tuxedo Labs ‘*Teardown*’. Featuring a fully destructible environment, particle simulations of fire and smoke, and an incredible in-house lighting system, it has garnered almost 76,000 positive reviews on steam, gaining the award for ‘*Excellence in Design*’ at the Independent Games Festival in 2021. (Tuxedo Labs, 2023) (Informa Tech, 2023) According to the Tuxedo Labs modding wiki, the artists used ‘*MagicaVoxel*’, a lightweight voxel art editor, to create all assets for the game. (Tuxedo Labs, 2023) This art editor is still supported, is fully open source and has hundreds of modelling tutorials. It is an incredibly powerful tool within the modelling of 3D voxel environments; however, they require hundreds of hours in development to take form. A more efficient method, used for both rapid prototyping and final model products is LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging). LiDAR uses pulses of light to rapidly generate point clouds, which are simply a collection of points in three-dimensional space. As suggested by Xu, Tong & Stilla, point clouds can be efficiently converted into a voxel representation, and then suggests their usage within structural analysis and 3D simulation of fluids, volume estimation and pathfinding. They state that voxels are one of the best primitives used to transfer point cloud data into a higher data format, due to their speed and efficiency, although suggests they may lack accuracy in conversion. (Tong, Stilla, & Xu, 2021)

The aim of this paper is the investigation of the possible voxel future, as a replacement for polygons as the standard geometric primitive for 3D visualization. The strengths and weaknesses of voxels should be highlighted, suggesting further research avenues. The research question is,

*“Could voxels replace polygons, as the standard geometric primitive for 3D visualization?”*

## Contextual Review

Voxels do have limitations, research within Design & Technology (Telea & Jalba, 2011), Engineering (McNeely, Puterbaugh, & Troy, 2005), Biomedical Studies (Mason, et al., 2000), all have encountered issues within the large memory consumption of their voxel grids. Voxel grids are generally stored within a regular grid structure, creating a memory footprint of O(n^3) where n represents the width, length and height, recent studies have explored the manipulation of a regular grid using warp fields to create dynamic irregular grids. (Lombardi, et al., 2019) Many have attempted to solve this issue, specifically, a major Australian software company named ‘*Euclideon*’. In 2010, the CEO, Bruce Dell, a video showing an ‘*Unlimited Detail Technology*’, showcasing the possibility of any voxel grid size to be rendered with close to ‘*Unlimited*’ detail. (Quipster99, 2010) Although their explanation is extremely vague, and the company has yet to disclose any algorithms for this method, their implementation is similar to that of Sparse Voxel Octrees. Sparse Voxel Octrees (SVOs) is a compression technique combining that of Sparse Voxels, and Octree Voxels. Sparse voxels compress the grid to only store the data of occupied values. (Figure 2) Octree Voxels divide 3D space into hierarchy of octants, that are recursively divided until the final level of detail is achieved. (Figure 3)

A picture containing shoji, athletic game

Description automatically generated

Simple Gridded Voxelization (Figure 1)

A diagram of a circle and a cross

Description automatically generated

Sparse Voxel Compression (Figure 2)

A diagram of a circle and a cross

Description automatically generated

Octree Voxel Compression (Figure 3)

Studies have suggested that both the compression methods Sparse Voxels, and Octree Voxels, can be incredibly efficient in terms of physical memory, a mentionable study by Gebhardt, Scott et al. finding both file sizes to be as low as 0.0008x when compared to a traditional regular voxel grid. This would suggest this technique could be efficient within file storage, even without the usage of the combination of to create a Sparse Voxel Octree. This research suggests that SVOs would allow for greater control over the level of detail whilst improving file size, and subsequently, render speed. However these compression techniques are not perfect, due to the nature of their compression, models that are more densely populated, with zero empty space or duplication would not receive the same benefits as others without.

Improving performance with voxels is not necessarily restricted to file size, as there can be constraints within CPU/GPU performance. Unique rendering practices are required, a major one named Ray Marching, which uses rays to traverses through the voxel grid using distance estimations. Dreams, a voxel-based game creation system with in-built 3D modelling software uses a form of Ray Marching known as Sphere Tracing, used to smoothen surfaces. (Alex Evans, 2015) These improvements are greatly are proved effective, as shown through the entire creation tool being run within the limited PS4’s specifications.

Current tools within games.

Morton’s Code.

Aesthetical aspects of voxels and polygons.

Hardware accelerated.

Previous research on the comparison between voxels and polygons.

Hybrid engines using models of both voxels and polygons. Hybrid Rendering Techniques.

Neural Sparse Voxel Fields.

* Put relevant materials of this study into context.

## Methods & Design

* What are you going to do?
* How are you going to do it?
* How does it help *solve* the research question?
* Describe the methods including its design features.
* Can include references, sources and constraints.

## Project Plan

* What are the main tasks involved within this project?
* What are the intended deliverables at the end of this project?
* Create a work plan, e.g. Using a Gantt Chart

## Ethical Considerations

* What ethical issues should be noted?
* Evidence of approved application.

## 1. Introduction Notes (part of 60%)

* Opening statement should be clear, the issue I am looking to solve should be well argued and should naturally lead into the research question.

1. Introduce current ‘standard’ geometric primitive.
2. Give insight as to why polygons are the standard geometric primitive.
3. Introduce alterative of voxels and give definitions.
4. Give insight as to why voxels are not the current standard geometric primitive.
5. Suggest that voxels have been overlooked when looking at its specific use case/the future of voxels could have more voxels use cases.

## 2. Contextual Review Notes (part of 60%)

* Extensive use of literature from scholarly articles. Follows smoothly from statement to statement and shows critical engagement with literature.

## 3. Methods & Design Notes (20%)

* Clear description of design methods that are to be employed. Methods are well justified over any alternative methods, which is backed up by supporting materials. Description of procedures and tools is clear.

## 4. Project Plan (20%)

* High level of understanding of the tasks involved within the project objectives. Document is fully chaptered with sufficient detail. Work plan describing all considerations. Ethics is fully presented, approved, or not required based on evidence.

## Notes

### RSPI Project

### Topic

Reaffirm already existing research that Morton’s code/Z-Order curve can help Sparse Voxel Octree tree traversal.

Show the point of contention within voxels and showcase best use cases for each. Main point – Mention although Polygons may be better than voxels in terms of many rasterization techniques, however looking into the future of computer graphics, ray marching can hold its own against ray tracing.

## Questions

1. Is my introductions direction clear enough, and are any more in text references required?
2. Does specific referencing matter? Moore’s law was first stated in 1965, later changed in 1975, however, most references link to an article published in 1995.Key Papers

[Traversing Sparse Voxel Octrees](https://nccastaff.bournemouth.ac.uk/jmacey/MastersProject/MSc18/05/traversingsparsevoxeloctrees.pdf)

[UE5 Lumen](https://advances.realtimerendering.com/s2022/SIGGRAPH2022-Advances-Lumen-Wright%20et%20al.pdf)

It is fine to introduce a topic direction in the introduction, and pivot within the contextual review as long as it is relevant and makes sense. For instance, going towards see if voxels have a potential future, then changing to well this future will require an aesthetical component.

## Voxels

Project uses a voxel-based approach to haptic feedback. Has limitations within its voxel size due to memory consumption and states it accepts a common engineer rule of 0.5-inch clearance wherever possible.

(McNeely, Puterbaugh, & Troy, 2005)

Project uses a neural voxel volume to dynamically render 3D objects from 2D images. Discusses limtiations of voxels cubic relationship of resolution and memory and solves this limitation using warp fields to create dynamic irregular grids.

(Lombardi, et al., 2019)

Project discusses printability of models sent to a 3D printer using a voxel-based representation. Defines the projects main limitation as the voxelization resolution capable by their GPUs, as certain characteristics have not been calculated within the model. Discusses the solution of this problem as more GPU memory.

(Telea & Jalba, 2011)

Project discussing various factors within biological tissue during electromagnetic-field exposure. Explains that generally in this field, they need incredibly small voxel sizes, of which when calculated came out to much more RAM usage than their computers could handle. This was one of the main limitations of this project.

(Mason, et al., 2000)

Investigating destructible terrain using voxels in C++. Currently limited by terrain size as entire terrain is rendered, suggests the usage of an Octree.

(Wilder, 2015)