🌟 Hoshi: A* Pathfinding Algorithm in MIPS Assembly

📝 Overview

Hoshi (星, Japanese for "star") is a complete implementation of the A* pathfinding algorithm in MIPS assembly language. This project demonstrates low-level programming concepts by implementing a complex algorithmic solution in assembly language, offering valuable insights into computer architecture and optimization techniques.

🚀 Features

- ✅ **Complete A* algorithm implementation** in pure MIPS assembly
- ✅ **Priority Queue** with efficient insertion and extraction operations
- ✅ **Manhattan/Chebyshev Distance Heuristic** for optimal path calculation
- ✅ **Visual Representation** through bitmap display for step-by-step algorithm progression
- ✅ **Obstacle Detection** with robust path planning around barriers
- ✅ **Path Reconstruction** with visual highlighting of the optimal route

🧠 A* Algorithm: Core Concepts and Implementation

What is A*?

A* (pronounced "A-star") is an informed search algorithm widely used in pathfinding and graph traversal. It efficiently plots a traversable path between multiple nodes by maintaining a priority queue of paths and choosing the lowest-cost path to expand.

Algorithm Overview

The A* algorithm is built on three key components: 1. **g-score**: The actual cost from the start node to the current node 2. **h-score**: A heuristic estimate of the cost from the current node to the goal 3. **f-score**: The sum of g-score and h-score, representing the total estimated cost

The algorithm maintains two sets: - **Open Set**: Nodes to be evaluated (stored in a priority queue) - **Closed Set**: Nodes already evaluated

Algorithm Pseudocode

```
1. Initialize:
    • Open List: Contains nodes yet to be evaluated (start with start node)
    • Closed List: Stores nodes already evaluated (starts empty)
    • Set start.g = 0: Cost from start to start
    • Set start.h = heuristic(start, goal): Estimated cost from start to goal
    • Compute start.f = start.g + start.h
    • Set start.parent = null: No parent yet
```

```
2. Main loop: While open list is not empty:
   • Select current as the node in openList with the lowest f value
   • Goal check:
     ◦ If current == goal, return the reconstructed path
   • Move current node:
     ◦ Remove current from openList
     ◦ Add current to closedList
   • Process neighbors:
     ◦ For each neighbor of current:
       ▪ Skip if neighbor is in closedList
       ▪ Compute tentative_g = current.g + distance(current, neighbor)
       ▪ If neighbor is not in openList: Add it
       ▪ Else if tentative_g >= neighbor.g: Skip (existing path is better)
       ▪ Otherwise (this path is better):
         ▫ Update neighbor.parent = current
         ▫ Update neighbor.g = tentative_g
         ▫ Update neighbor.h = heuristic(neighbor, goal)
         ▫ Recompute neighbor.f = neighbor.g + neighbor.h

3. If loop ends with no path found:
   • Return failure: No path exists between start and goal

4. Path Reconstruction Function:
   • Start from goal node
   • Trace back using parent links, adding each node to a path
   • Return the path in reverse (from start to goal)
```

Core Implementation in MIPS Assembly

The A* algorithm is implemented in the `a_star` function, which follows the pseudocode above:

```
a_star:
    # Function setup
    addi    $sp, $sp, -4
    sw      $ra, 0($sp)

    # Initialize nodes and data structures
    jal     initialize_nodes

    # Setup start node
    lw      $s0, start_x
    lw      $s1, start_y

    # Set g-score of start node to 0
    move    $a0, $s0
    move    $a1, $s1
    li      $a2, 0
    jal     set_g_score
```

```
    # Calculate h-score using heuristic
    lw      $a2, goal_x
    lw      $a3, goal_y
    jal     chebyshevDistance  # or manhattanDistance

    # Calculate f-score (g + h)
    move    $a2, $v0
    move    $a0, $s0
    move    $a1, $s1
    jal     set_f_score

    # Push start node to open set
    move    $a0, $s0
    move    $a1, $s1
    li      $a2, 0  # parent (none for start)
    move    $a3, $v0  # f-score
    jal     push

    # Main loop
a_star_loop:
    # Check if open set is empty
    la      $t0, heapSize
    lw      $t0, 0($t0)
    beqz    $t0, a_star_no_path

    # Pop node with lowest f-score
    jal     pop

    # Check if popped node is goal
    la      $t0, extracted_node
    lw      $t1, 0($t0)  # x
    lw      $t2, 4($t0)  # y
    lw      $t3, goal_x
    lw      $t4, goal_y

    beq     $t1, $t3, goal_check_y
    j       not_goal

goal_check_y:
    beq     $t2, $t4, a_star_found_path

not_goal:
    # Add current node to closed set
    move    $a0, $t1
    move    $a1, $t2
    jal     add_to_closed_set
```

```
    # Process neighbors (4 directions)
    li      $s0, 0  # direction counter

process_neighbors:
    li      $t0, 4
    beq     $s0, $t0, a_star_loop  # If all neighbors processed

    # Calculate neighbor coordinates
    la      $t0, d4x
    la      $t1, d4y
    sll     $t2, $s0, 2
    add     $t0, $t0, $t2
    add     $t1, $t1, $t2
    lw      $t2, 0($t0)  # dx
    lw      $t3, 0($t1)  # dy

    la      $t0, extracted_node
    lw      $t4, 0($t0)  # current.x
    lw      $t5, 4($t0)  # current.y

    add     $t6, $t4, $t2  # neighbor.x
    add     $t7, $t5, $t3  # neighbor.y

    # Check if valid position
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    jal     is_valid_position
    beqz    $v0, next_neighbor

    # Check if in closed set
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    jal     is_in_closed_set
    bnez    $v0, next_neighbor

    # Calculate tentative g-score
    move    $a0, $t4
    move    $a1, $t5
    jal     get_g_score

    addi    $t0, $v0, 1  # tentative_g = current.g + 1

    # Get neighbor's current g-score
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    jal     get_g_score

    # Compare tentative_g with neighbor.g
```

```
    bge     $t0, $v0, next_neighbor  # Skip if not better

    # Update neighbor's scores
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    move    $a2, $t0  # new g-score
    jal     set_g_score

    # Calculate h-score
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    lw      $a2, goal_x
    lw      $a3, goal_y
    jal     chebyshevDistance

    # Calculate new f-score
    add     $a2, $t0, $v0  # g + h
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    jal     set_f_score

    # Set parent
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    move    $a2, $t4  # parent.x
    move    $a3, $t5  # parent.y
    jal     set_parent

    # Push neighbor to open set
    move    $a0, $t6
    move    $a1, $t7
    move    $a2, $a2  # parent reference
    move    $a3, $a2  # f-score
    jal     push

next_neighbor:
    addi    $s0, $s0, 1
    j       process_neighbors

a_star_found_path:
    # Print success message
    la      $a0, path_found_msg
    li      $v0, 4
    syscall

    # Reconstruct path
    lw      $a0, goal_x
    lw      $a1, goal_y
    jal     constructPathProcedure
```

Data Structures and Modules

The implementation is organized into several modules, each handling specific aspects of the algorithm:

1. Priority Queue

The priority queue is implemented as a binary min-heap, which ensures efficient extraction of the node with the lowest f-score.

Node Structure in the Priority Queue

Offset	Field	Size (bytes)
0	x	4
4	y	4
8	parent	4
12	fScore	4

Key Operations:

- **push**: Inserts a node with O(log n) complexity
- **pop**: Extracts the node with lowest f-score with O(log n) complexity

2. Node List

Each node in the grid has specific properties that track its state in the A* algorithm.

Node Structure

Offset	Field	Size (bytes)
0	x	4
4	y	4
8	wall	4
12	gScore	4
16	hScore	4
20	fScore	4
24	parent_x	4
28	parent_y	4

Key Operations:

- **initialize_nodes**: Sets up the grid based on map data
- **set_g_score/get_g_score**: Manages cost from start
- **set_f_score/get_f_score**: Manages total estimated cost

3. Bitmap Display

The bitmap module manages visualization, providing a graphical representation of the A* algorithm's execution.

Display Constants

```
.eqv    displayWidth, 16       # Width of the display in units
.eqv    displayHeight, 16      # Height of the display in units
.eqv    gridCellWidth, 2       # Width of each grid cell
.eqv    gridCellHeight, 2      # Height of each grid cell
.eqv    gridWidth, 8           # Width of the grid in cells
.eqv    gridHeight, 8          # Height of the grid in cells
.eqv    bitmapBaseAddress, 0x10040000  # Memory address of bitmap
```

Key Operations:

- **clearScreen**: Initializes the display
- **drawGridNode**: Renders a single node with specific color based on its state
- **drawGrid**: Renders the entire grid

4. Heuristic Functions

The A* algorithm uses heuristic functions to estimate the cost from any node to the goal.

Available Heuristics:

- **Manhattan Distance**: Sum of horizontal and vertical distances
- **Chebyshev Distance**: Maximum of horizontal and vertical distances

```
manhattanDistance:
    # Calculate |x1-x2| + |y1-y2|
    sub     $t0, $a0, $a2      # x1-x2
    abs     $t0, $t0           # |x1-x2|

    sub     $t1, $a1, $a3      # y1-y2
    abs     $t1, $t1           # |y1-y2|

    add     $v0, $t0, $t1      # |x1-x2| + |y1-y2|
    jr      $ra

chebyshevDistance:
    # Calculate max(|x1-x2|, |y1-y2|)
    sub     $t0, $a0, $a2      # x1-x2
    abs     $t0, $t0           # |x1-x2|

    sub     $t1, $a1, $a3      # y1-y2
    abs     $t1, $t1           # |y1-y2|

    # Find maximum
    bge     $t0, $t1, max_is_x
    move    $v0, $t1
    j       chebyshev_return

max_is_x:
    move    $v0, $t0
```

5. Path Reconstruction

Once the A* algorithm finds a path, it traces back from the goal to the start using parent pointers.

Implementation Details

Memory Management

The implementation uses a consistent pattern to locate nodes in memory:

```
# Calculate node address from (x,y) coordinates
lw      $t0, map_width        # Load grid width
mul     $t1, $a1, $t0         # t1 = y * width
add     $t1, $t1, $a0         # t1 = y * width + x
lw      $t2, node_size        # Load node size in bytes
mul     $t3, $t1, $t2         # t3 = index * node_size
la      $t4, nodes            # Load base address
add     $t4, $t4, $t3         # t4 = base + offset
```

This efficiently implements the formula: &nodes`[y * width + x]` to convert 2D coordinates to memory addresses.

Register Usage Strategy

The implementation follows a consistent register allocation strategy: - `$s0-$s7`: Preserved across function calls, used for loop variables and important data - `$t0-$t9`: Temporary calculations, not preserved across calls - `$a0-$a3`: Function arguments - `$v0-$v1`: Function return values - `$ra`: Return address register, preserved on stack when making nested calls

Stack Management

Proper stack management is critical for function calls and recursion:

```
# Function prologue
addi    $sp, $sp, -4        # Allocate stack space
sw      $ra, 0($sp)         # Save return address

# Function body
# ...

# Function epilogue
lw      $ra, 0($sp)         # Restore return address
addi    $sp, $sp, 4         # Deallocate stack space
jr      $ra                 # Return
```

Visualization

The visualization uses a consistent color scheme: - **Color 0** (White): Background/free space - **Color 1** (Black): Walls/obstacles - **Color 2** (Green): Goal node - **Color 3** (Green): Final path - **Color 5** (Yellow): Current node being explored - **Color 8** (Cyan): Start node - **Color 9** (Gray): Nodes in the open set

This color coding makes it easy to understand the algorithm's progress visually.

Optimization Techniques

1. **Priority Queue**: O(log n) operations for managing the open set
2. **Register Usage**: Strategic register allocation minimizes memory access
3. **Closed Set**: Efficient tracking of evaluated nodes
4. **Memory Access**: Calculates addresses efficiently to minimize overhead
5. **Data Organization**: Node structures organized for efficient access patterns

Performance Analysis

Operation	Time Complexity
Node Extraction	O(log n)
Node Insertion	O(log n)
Path Reconstruction	O(p) where p is path length
Heuristic Calculation	O(1)
Overall Algorithm	O(E log V) where V is number of nodes and E is number of edges

Movement Directions

The implementation supports both 4-way and 8-way movement:

```
# 4-way movement (up, right, down, left)
d4x:                .word       0, 1, 0, -1
d4y:                .word       -1, 0, 1, 0

# 8-way movement (includes diagonals)
d8x:                .word       0, 1, 1, 1, 0, -1, -1, -1
d8y:                .word       -1, -1, 0, 1, 1, 1, 0, -1
```

The default implementation uses 4-way movement for simplicity and clarity.

Educational Value

This implementation offers several educational insights: 1. **Low-level Programming**: Direct memory management and register allocation 2. **Algorithm Implementation**: From theory to practical assembly code 3. **Data Structures**: Priority queue and grid management 4.

Visualization: Real-time algorithm execution display 5. **Optimization**: Balancing readability with performance

HOSHI : the story of a program to reach a star that no one can see