

Advent of Code

Day Eight

LucidBrot

August 2020

1 About

The task at adventofcode 2019 day 8 is fairly straightforward itself. It can be summarized as

Read the input line of N numeric characters into *layers* of size $width * height$ (which are known) to find the layer that contains the lowest number of zeros. Then return the number of '1' digits multiplied by the number of '2' digits within that layer.

However, we're doing this in \LaTeX , which is typeset in spongebob-case for a reason.

2 The \LaTeX Experience

First of all, we're doing something that it was not meant to be used for – so that means we never get the search results we want. Searching about arrays in \LaTeX for example gives you an explanation about how to typeset matrices. Very useful, but not what I wanted. Thankfully, the pgfplots sourceforge page contains a pdf with *Notes On Programming in \TeX* .

Secondly, there don't seem to be any variables. Just *counters*, *counts* which are the \TeX version. and *ifdefs* and most importantly *macros*. But I did not read up on the internals of \TeX and \LaTeX , so I have no clue about the exact way that macros are evaluated. Sometimes you can define a command that works perfectly well for a constant argument, but if you dare use it on the

result of another command, you're being had from multiple directions. Because that result has not already been evaluated (expanded) and is passed as-is into the other command. My version of pdfLaTeX does not feature the primitive `\expanded` yet. Using `\expandafter` feels very clunky. Luckily there's a hack around that to be found here. And sometimes the problem was actually the `xstring` package which also breaks the hack.

The macros of this package are not purely expandable, i.e. they cannot be put in the argument of an `\edef`. Nestling macros is not possible neither.

For this reason, all the macros returning a result (i.e. all excepted the tests) have an optional argument in last position. The syntax is `[name]`, where `name` is the name of the control sequence that will receive the result of the macro: the assignment is made with an `\edef` which make the result of the macro name purely expandable. Of course, if an optional argument is present, the macro does not display anything.^[1]

After eliminating some problems of this sort by storing the result in a new command by virtue of the optional argument, the same problem still appeared because some commands just don't work due to the same issue, even if they are making use of the optional argument to return that in turn (See Figure 1, Figure 2).

(Btw, I have used `\autoref` above, for the second figure reference, instead of `\ref` and that is pretty cool.)

```
\def\getchar[#1]#2{%
\StrMid{#1}{#2}{\numexpr #2 + 0\relax}[\mychar]%
\mychar}
```

Figure 1: This command does not like to be used on a non-constant string.

Finally, the performance of the `xstring` package is whack. It takes more than two minutes to figure out the length of a 15'000 character string. The bash command `wc -c inputfile.txt` does that in less than a second.

...	@@ -143,8 +143,8 @@ \section{Introduction}
143	143 % assign current char
144	144 \def\currentchar{\getchar[\fileline]{\digitctr}}
145	145 Char Char Bins: \currentchar\\
146	- % % check if zero
147	- % \IfEq {0}{\currentchar}{
146	+ % check if zero
147	+ \IfEq {0}{\currentchar}{
148	148 \advance \currentlayerzerocount 1
149	149 Advanced currentlayerzerocount to \the\currentlayerzerocount
150	150
...	@@ -157,9 +157,9 @@ \section{Introduction}
157	157 \digitctr={\the\numexpr \layersize * \currentlayer + \layersize}
158	158 Layer \the\currentlayer has more zeros than the current best layer (\the\bestlayer) so we skip ahead to character at index \digitctr to start the next layer.
159	159 \fi
160	- % }{\%else
160	+ }{\%else
161	161 The current char \currentchar~does not equal 0. It is \meaning\currentchar whereas 0 is \meaning0.
162	- % }%fi
162	+ }%fi
163	163 \ifnum \digitctr<\interval{\layersize * \currentlayer + \layersize}
164	164 \repeat
165	165 % if there were very little zeros, we can update the best layer
....	

Figure 2: The difference between wrong code that compiles (red) and seemingly correct code that produces a compiler error (green).

3 StrLen

Since `xstring`'s `StrLen` is so slow, how about creating a faster one? We'll just have to run `tex` with the `--shell-escape` flag.[2] (See Figure 3). Using that allows us to escape to the shell - which is either `bash` or the windows `cmd.exe`.



Figure 3: TeXworks settings for shellescape

Somehow, `pdflatex` threads kept running despite me stopping them in TeXworks or even closing TeXworks. For further debugging, the rest of this section is skipped for now, hence. Currently, the section is being run.

But as it turned out, skipping this section about `shellex` helped nothing at all regarding this issue... It happened with the real input, but not with the `\debug` input.

A simple `\input{"echo test"}` already works! test!

But I cannot figure out how to correctly call `wc -c inputfile.tex` because the shell spawns in the wrong path (`AppData/Local/Temp/mik53499/_src`). And also, for some reason the following code does not even create a file `outfile.blubb` anywhere on my machine.

```
\input{|"echo a > outfile.blubb"}
```

The problem seems to be, according to the logs, that the pipe closes before the left side is finished writing to stdout. But that is actually happening due to the `echo` earlier. When I leave it out, that's not logged.

Maybe using python is easier? You'd have to read the source to get this one though.[3]

```
\begin{pycode}{abc}
print(1+12)
\end{pycode}
```

But no, that also results in a problem with writing to a file... So let me try something I understand!

```
\input{|"python -c "print(1+2);"}
```

And as you should be able to see, it works! It does output some `SyntaxError` in the Console output, but it seems like I can ignore that?!

So for computing stringlength, a quick python call should speed things up.

```
\input{|"python -c "print(len('mystringofunkownlength'));"}
```

It is notable that spaces within that string get lost before they are passed to python. Thankfully we don't need this here. But this reminds me of PyAuCalc. The loss of spacing also explains why some commands don't work. E.g. importing a python module without spaces is not trivial.

We can make \LaTeX paste a string into that as well...

```
\def\mystr{hello}
\def\mystrtwo{\mystr}
\input{|"python -c "print(len('\mystrtwo'));"}
```

...but for some reason it fails when used with our included inputstring. There's a site with an example on how to include text from a file, but it does not work at all for me[4]. I guess I'll just hardcode it inside this file here instead... For that, however, the line length limit becomes an issue. So I've declared 74 commands and combined them into one. Aand turns out that also didn't help. The string just ends after some two hundred characters.

So to quote a professor of mine, J. Hromkovic,

*"**Strategy: We Give Up!** What can we do to still be able to state something impressive?"*

Well, I can just hardcode the damn string length. That's not really worse than hardcoding the input.

During Part 2, I'm revisiting this section again, though. because `StrMid` is just so very slow! Now I could of course hardcode a command that returns the correct character based on the argument, but isn't that a bit too cheaty? Maybe. But my program technically works, it's just too slow. If you want one that does not cheat, check out Sansero's repo.

Hardcoded string char access: blubb 1 blubb

```
(0)[ 1], (1)[ 1], (2)[ 1], (3)[ 1],  
The output should have been: 1, 1, 1, 1
```

While working on this, I have found an understandable explanation for `\expandafter`.^[10] But maybe that's not my problem. Maybe my problem is once again that I'm defining things in a loop.^[11,12] Maybe those approaches would be a good idea: Create distinct macros in each loop iteration instead of overwriting the same one each time (and failing at overwriting it).

But nevermind! It turns out I did everything well, except that I started my test output at a different index than I thought... the last few hours were spent on a ghost bug.

4 Get Head Performance

Again, `xstring` is extremely slow with big strings. So I split everything into layers of 100 chars. But that's still noticeably slower at the end of the layer than at the start of the layer... even though it's only supposed to be a quick character access. So I'm transforming everything into head accesses at index zero.

5 Scoping

Nested loops require scoping around the inner loop. Which in turn means we need to use the `\global` keyword to assign to variables from outside the inner scope. And that in turn makes it really weird to use `StrGobbleLeft` from the `xstring` package when I'm trying to remove a character and store the result back in the same string.

The solution is probably a rewrite that uses only one loop plus an if condition that checks the modulus of the loop counter and acts appropriately whenever a layer is finished.

6 Execution: Getting our Feet Wet

We had 34 Strawberries for this year's harvest. Probably not enough. So we are sad now and solve <https://adventofcode.com/2019/day/8>.

h e

1

6

220002201222100002

hello world 3 3 300

Image Width: 3 Image Height: 2

I want to loop 6 times for the first layer.

The input file contains 18characters.

7 Day Eight Part Two: Because this task wasn't that hard

Each image layer consists of numbers that represent pixel informa-

tion. One digit, one pixel.

0 \rightleftharpoons black
1 \rightleftharpoons white
2 \rightleftharpoons transparent

You're given multiple layers. For each pixel coordinate pair (x, y) find the *first* nontransparent value.

debug for part two (0)[1], (1)[1], (2)[1], (3)[1],

Not running part two as per flags.

Let me just perform some magic - Consider Figure 5. There's only one problem with that: It assumes that the input strings are constant. Since I input the value of a counter, mine are not, and the magical string that ends up being collected is just a repetition of the last value it had. Adding `\immediate` and `\edef` was not helpful.[7,8]

Now of course, I don't actually need that collection - I can place my computation wherever I like. It would still have been cool though - partly because I have weird spacing when I output my computation character by character, and partly because this is a nice trick to have in my spellbook at the ready. Luckily, the author of that trick replied to my inquiry by adding an `\edef` and some `\expandafter` (Figure 4).

@lucidbrot

```
\def\myappendxstring#1{  
  \edef\tmp{#1}\expandafter\g@addto@macro%  
  \expandafter\mystring\expandafter{\tmp} }
```

Then,

```
\stepcounter{mycounter} %  
\myappendxstring{Counter value is \themycounter. }
```

- Steven B. Segletes

Figure 4: S.B. Segletes' addition.

Magic:


```

% Throughout the document, collect the variable using
\myappendstring{hello}
% display the computed variable here

\makeatletter
\@starttoc{xyz}% executes stuff in .xyz file
\makeatother

\thefinalstring
% the following line must be performed at the end of the computation -
% e.g. at the end of the document.

\addtocontents{xyz}{\gdef\protect\thefinalstring{\mystring}}

```

Figure 5: Magic to collect a variable, then print it at the start of the document. [7]

8 Linux

I’ve thought I’d continue working on this file in the train, on my laptop. Which uses Ubuntu instead of Windows. A quick

```

sudo apt-get update
sudo apt-get install texlive-full texmaker

```

and a `git clone` later and I was almost set up.

Seems like my latex distribution or environment on Ubuntu behaves differently though. First of all, I had to remove an exclamation mark from the definition of my `mycode` environment for some reason. I hope it’s still valid on Windows with MikTeX. And I also had to set up the shell-escape again. It seems like I only have the option of always using it or never, as opposed to the dropdown list with custom options I have on windows. Also, I haven’t figured out yet if I’m running the correct tools. On Windows, I’m doing a PdfLaTeX + MakeIndex + BibTex. That does not really exist on my Ubuntu, so I’m just doing PdfLaTeX only. I’ll have to learn more about this. But it actually seems like just using PdfLaTeX is enough for generating those citation entries.

Also, the error messages are more, and they are more pedantic/verbose. That could be helpful for debugging, but also annoying. Searching for the first of those error messages in google led me to a valuable explanation about extra closing braces.[13]

Argument of \@newctr has an extra }.<inserted text>\par \repeat

Maybe I should consider all the warnings I'm getting without even running part two first? Maybe also not. They are all just either about design (overfull hbox, fonts) or warn about things that are like I want them to be. E.g. the abbreviation for one of the authors is undefined - but that's totally fine because this is not an abbreviation. It's the authors full name!

9 Todo

Once this is done, I should inform the person who said I should inform them once this is done, to be found at Twitter.

Re-enable `\runshellex`.

cite sansero

I want to attach the source code to this file.

Fix segletes figure quote.

I also want ot measure how long this takes. See here for example.

10 Performance

I have tried to measure the time of my code using the `13benchmark` package. But including this package failed because LaTeX thinks my PC has no clock. PDF Elapsed Time in seconds: 1 seconds

The value of `\pdfelapsedtime` is the number of seconds elapsed multiplied by 65536. [9]

11 Source

The source code is clingy: It attached itself to this file. Open it in Adobe Reader and view it under Attachments.

Linking to it does not work unless the file is also a pdf, it seems.

References

- [1] Gonzalo Medina, *Nest StrLen and ifthenelse commands*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/15424/102826>. Accessed 05.08.2020.
- [2] Dimitrios Desyllas, *texify.exe in TeXworks in MSWindows 10: MiKTeX encountered internal error when compile with -shell-escape*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/437933/1028266>. Accessed 05.08.2020.
- [3] Uwe Ziegenhagen, *Combining L^AT_EX with Python* (09.08.2019), <https://tug.org/tug2019/slides/slides-ziegenhagen-python.pdf>. Accessed 05.08.2020.
- [4] Jason Gross, *Why is everyeof needed to avoid...*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/q/516031/102826>. Accessed 07.08.2020.
- [5] Burk, *TeX/global*, <https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/TeX/global>. Accessed 21.08.2020.
- [6] cfr, *Setting a Global Variable in TikZ Loop*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/436829/102826>. Accessed 21.08.2020.
- [7] Steven B. Segletes, *Append strings to a variable and display them at the front of the document*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/402174/102826>. Accessed 25.08.2020.
- [8] Joseph Wright, *What are \immediate & \write18 and how does one use them?*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/20446/102826>. Accessed 25.08.2020.
- [9] Will Robertson, *Are there LaTeX performance profiling tools?*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/547/102826>. Accessed 25.08.2020.
- [10] Stefan v. Bechtolsheim, *A tutorial on \expandafter*, <https://www.tug.org/TUGboat/tb09-1/tb20bechtolsheim.pdf>. Accessed 28.08.2020.
- [11] cgnieder and Sebastian, *Defining and expanding macros In loops*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/312177/102826>. Accessed 28.08.2020.
- [12] David Carlisle, *Defining new commands inside a for loop*, <https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/57037/102826>. Accessed 28.08.2020.
- [13] Unknown, *An extra }?*, <http://www.texfaq.org/FAQ-extrabrace>. Accessed 28.08.2020.