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Using algorithm visualizations in computer science education

Research Article

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Abstract: Algorithm visualization illustrates how algorithms work in a graphical way. It mainly aims to simplify and deepen the understanding of algorithms operation. Within the paper we discuss the possibility of enriching the standard methods of teaching algorithms, with the algorithm visualizations. As a step in this direction, we introduce the VizAlgo algorithm visualization platform, present our practical experiences and describe possible future directions, based on our experiences and exploration performed by means of a simple questionnaire.

Keywords: algorithm visualization • plugin-based visualization platform • computer science education

1. Introduction and motivation

Algorithms and data structures as an essential part of knowledge in a framework of computer science[1] have their stable position in computer science curricula[2], since every computer scientist and every professional programmer should have the basic knowledge from the area [1]. With the increasing number of students in Central European's higher education systems in last decades (more concrete numbers and impacts for the case of Slovak one can be found in [2]), introduction of appropriate methods into the process of their education is also required. Our scope here is the higher education in the field of computer science. So within the paper, we discuss the extension of standard methods of teaching algorithms, using the whiteboard or slides, with the algorithm visualizations. According to [3] they can be used to attract students' attention during the lecture, explain concepts in visual terms, encourage a practical learning process, and facilitate better communication between students and instructors. Interactive algorithm visualizations allow students to experiment and explore the ideas with respect to their individual needs. Extensive studies on algorithm visualization effectiveness are

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[1] *Computer Science Curriculum 2008, Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). Available: http://www.acm.org/education/curricula*

[2] *Curriculum Guidelines for Undergraduate Degree Programs in Information Technology, IT 2008 Curriculum, Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). Available: http://www.acm.org/education/curricula*

available nowadays, and results are quite encouraging. A systematic meta-study of 24 experimental studies can be found in [4]. Results of empirical study aimed at the determination of factors influencing the effectiveness of algorithm visualization are published in [5]. Another example is the study with the objective to determine learning advantage of the interactive prediction facility provided by the courseware containing algorithm animations and data structure visualizations [6]. Based on above mentioned reasons, results of studies carried, as well as our own experiences and explorations, we consider algorithm visualization important and perspective area of further research and application of its results in nowadays computer science education.

Except the algorithm visualization, the term software visualization is also often used within the papers published in last years. It usually covers both visualization of algorithms and visualization of data structures, but sometimes also another aspects of software (like its development process) are considered, too [7]. Algorithm visualization, as part of software visualization, could be described as "graphical representation of an algorithm or program that dynamically changes as the algorithm runs" [8]. An overview of visualization taxonomies [9], together with an analysis of factors increasing the effectiveness of software visualization, is summarized in [10].

Even if the beginnings of algorithm visualization date back into 1940's [11], the greatest development in the area we could observe within the last 20-30 years. Modern approaches to software visualization were brought in the 1980's by the introduction of system BALSA (Brown & Sedgewick, Brown University, USA) [12]. Some of contemporary solutions include systems like TRAKLA2[3], ANIMAL[4] [13], JAWAA[5] or Algorithms In Action[6]. Concise overview of development in the area of software visualization we provided in [14], so it is not our intention to analyse this topic within the paper.

2. The ViAlgo Algorithm Visualization Platform

Based on analysis of existing solutions, we decided to start developing our own algorithm visualization platform named ViAlgo. The motivation behind the decision is detailed in [15] and it includes the fact, that the platform is intended to be used as a support tool within the subject Data structures and algorithms, taught in a bachelor study program at the author's home institution. The selection of topics within the scope of the subject is quite wide and it would probably be extended over the time. To cover the scope of the subject sufficiently many tools would be used, or quite big customization to selected tool would be required. Taking also possible changes to the subject's structure into account, we believed it was better to start designing and developing our own solution.

There are some specific issues of analysis and design of algorithm visualization systems, as it was described in [2]. Within the section 3 of our paper [15] we tried to give answers at least to most important questions from the user analysis, needs analysis, task analysis, differentiation analysis and domain analysis point of view.

To a development platform for the project was selected Java, ensuring high portability and very good support by available tools, libraries, etc. Another important decision to made was the selection of software framework to support extensibility. After the analysis of available solutions the JDPF was chosen, designed to reduce the time of development of plugin based applications[7].

2.1. Architecture of the Platform

Basically, we can think of the ViAlgo application as consisting of two cooperating parts: the main module and a set of independent plugin modules. The main module consists of several classes providing support for controlling the algorithm execution and rendering the algorithm visualization (Figure 1). Main components of them include ViAlgo class providing executive logic, algorithm settings, animation control and driving, a cooperation of the main module with plugin modules, ViAlgoApi class providing visualization related services for different components and selection of interface language, and ResultPrx class (core method) for algorithm control and visualizations. The rest of classes

[3] TRAKLA2 Software Project. Available: http://www.cse.hut.fi/en/research/SVG/TRAKLA2/
[4] ANIMAL Home Page. Available: http://www.algorithm-animal.org/animal/
[5] The JAWAA Homepage. Available: http://www.cs.ubc.ca/~kmarr/jawaa/
[6] Algorithms in Action. Available: http://web.cs.du.edu/~ds/
[7] JDPF - Java Simple Plugin Framework. Available: http://code.google.com/p/jdpf/

provide supporting methods for the application functionality and their description can be found in [19].

Figure 1. The structure of the main modules

A plugin module, on the other hand, contains the code of algorithm to be visualized and can utilize the services provided by the main module. To the plugin module, utilizing its services has only to fill up predefined data structures (strings, graphical shapes, etc.) with the data to be displayed in a process of algorithm visualization and it is the role of main module to display them properly. This helps to keep the size of the module code smaller, as well as the time to develop a plugin module performing visualization of particular algorithm. Rendering capabilities of the main module are provided by utilizing the Java Swing library or the moment, but it can be changed in the future, if needed. Communication between the main module and a plugin module is performed by calling dedicated methods mutually.

2.2. Developing Plugin Modules for the Platform

Plugin module development starts by creating the interface with the name of algorithm to be visualized (e.g. MergeSort). The interface just created will contain two public abstract methods `generateIndex()` and `actionPerformed()` as it is shown in Figure 3.

```
public interface MergeSort extends Plugin {
    public abstract void generateIndex();
    public abstract void actionPerformed();
}
```

Figure 3. An essential part of MergeSort interface

These methods will be overwritten in the plugin module implementing class (later **MergeSortImpl**) in our case). The class extends the `RedactiVity` (<app> mentioned above and implements interfaces **MergeSort** and `Runnable`.
In Figure 4 an essential part of `actionPerformed()` method used in Merge sort visualization is given. Here `BeginMerge()`, `Merge()` and `MergeArray()` represent methods of the Merge sort algorithm. These methods called within the code serve visualization purposes. For example method `colorizeBlue(a)` highlights the currently executing line in source pseudocode. `colorizeRed(a)` method provides colouring of elements in array to be swapped. `ArrayDraw()` method displays the array data in a form of bitmap, view (Figure 5). The view-based point of view on current data was added for

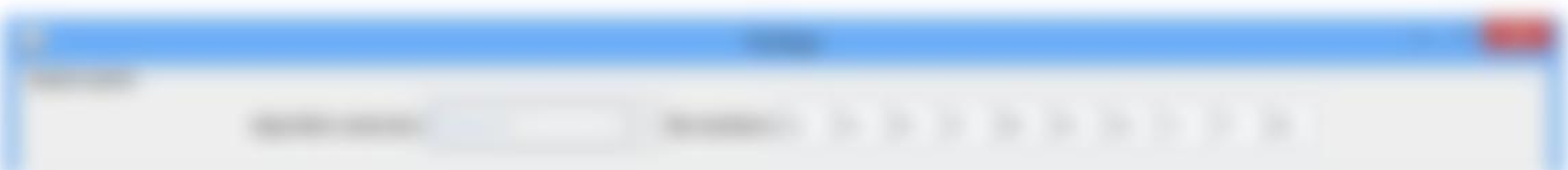

Figure 1. Screenshots of the VisAlgo application with running Hoare sort algorithm visualization.

data structures. We built utilities and new structures can serve as an example here. A demo visualization of this tool is available in [16], whereas basic principles of building are mostly presented in [17].

3. Research and experiences

Our motivation behind the effort of gathering information from students by means of simple questionnaires was twofold. Firstly, we wanted to know how well the tool is accepted by a group of its potential users. Whether our design decisions were right and whether the visualizations of algorithms is considered helpful at all.
Secondly, we were curious, what new visualizations and new features in general are expected by the users of the system. Their opinions could serve us as a motivation and inspiration for decisions within the next development.
Respondents to our case were 53 students from two different groups having enrolled the Data structures and algorithms subject, taught in the second year of the Informatics bachelor study program.
Questionnaire itself consisted of five questions. First two of them were used to get the feedback on the tool in its actual state and its usefulness to a process of teaching algorithms and data structures. Questions from three to five were oriented to the future development of the tool. Within questions three and two students by their answers were able to express their opinions on the list of algorithms that could be implemented, as well as issues generating on the areas of topics from the subject, that should be covered by the tool in the future. While these two questions were connected to the development of new (or enhancing existing) plugin modules, last question concerns the basic modules and its potentially new features.
The language of the questionnaire was Slovak (same as the language in which the subject is taught in participating study groups) and the questions had the following meaning:

1. Does using of the VisAlgo tool help to understand operation of algorithms?
   a) Yes b) No c) Don't know
2. Which of currently available visualizations was most helpful for you?

a) BubbleSort b) HeapSort c) InsertSort d) RadixSort e) SelectSort

1. Which core algorithms should be visualized?
   Please specify.
2. Which areas, covered by the subject, require visualization more than others?
   a) Connecting data structures b) Algorithm design techniques c) Sorting d) Advanced data structures for GUI Set implementation e) Data structures and algorithms for external storage
3. What new features of the tool are welcomed?
   a) Step back in running visualization b) Testing mode c) On-line availability d) Other features

Summary of responses to question four and their level analysis follow within the rest of the section.

Table 1. Responses to question 1.

	Yes	No	Don't know
responses	38	1	1

The opinion of almost all of students (38 from 51, Table 1) about helping to understand operation of algorithms was positive. Even if not expected it could be useful, we didn't know it will be so many. The result suggests our belief, that it is purposeful to continue with development of the tool and its use within the teaching process.

Table 2. Responses to question 2.

	BubbleSort	HeapSort	InsertSort	RadixSort	SelectSort
responses	8	31	7	39	5

The RadixSort visualization seems to be the most useful with its 39 votes from students. The second place took visualization of HeapSort algorithm. As it could be seen from the sum of numbers in Table 2, some of respondents selected more than one algorithm here.

Table 3. Responses to question 3.

	SortGUI	Text Login	SortDemo
responses	31	5	5

Most wanted visualization to develop is the one of QuickSort algorithm (Table 3) followed by visualization of operations on different kinds of trees. It should be noted here, that quite a big part of students did not exploit the possibility to express their opinion and leaved this question without an answer. Some of answers probably would not be satisfied as easy, including, as much as it is possible, as more old algorithms' (probably mentioned in the subject).

Table 4. Responses to question 4.

	SortGUI	Big-techniques	Sorting	Set GUI	External storage
responses	3	3	8	2	1

Areas requiring visualization more than others, according the answers in Table 4 are sorting (30) and advanced data structures (23). Teams of sorting algorithms were implemented till now, so this result confirms our decision to start with development of plugin modules for the platform from that area. Advanced data structures in case of the subject include different kinds of tree structures or hash tables.
According to results summarized in Table 5, step back in running visualization was selected as the most useful feature to implement in the future, followed by the on-line availability of the tool. Quite small number of suggestions was provided here within the 'Other features' option (including graphically better visualizations, optimum changing algorithm properties, and better specification of input set).

Table 4. Responses to question 4.

	Very hard	Tending easily	To two	Other features
responses	8	8	3	1

4. Conclusions

According to our findings, algorithm visualizations can be seen as a valuable supporting tool, used in addition to standard ways of education in the field of computer science. Within the paper we provided an overview of the VisMap algorithm visualization platform as well as our practical experiences with the system. We believe (and the results of questionnaires support our belief) it helps to improve the quality of education in the field and contributes to the solution for some of the problems in higher education mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

There are still open issues with using algorithm visualizations. Algorithm visualizations can help understanding the principles, but do not replace the need to implement algorithms by students in a chosen programming language. Another drawback of using algorithm visualizations within any subject is the lack of the tool offering required visualizations in a single package with the unified interface. The VisMap platform can also be considered as a step in this direction. Generally, more systematic evaluation of algorithm visualization tools is required, as there is rather collected evidence available that applications of algorithm visualizations are useful [3].

We summarized results of the questionnaires filled in by students in order to support our decisions on further development of the platform, too. The interviewees have voiced development of new plugin modules from the areas of sorting algorithms and more complex data structures. Some of proposed user-related features are on the list (like graphically better visualizations, optional changing of algorithm properties), but some of them will probably not be implemented in a near future (like undo/step back in running visualizations), as they would require more fundamental changes. Except the interviewees mentioned within the questionnaire, we also consider some other interesting features. Separate changes in algorithm procedures reflected in visualization, different visual views on running algorithm or simultaneous comparison of different algorithm visualizations.

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