Project Deliverable 4: Final Report and Presentation

Milan Bista

University of Cumberlands

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***Instructors: Machica Mcclain /* Vanessa Cooper**

https://github.com/mbista25742/MSCS532_Project

Presentation Link: presentation_live.mov

Abstract

Pathfinding algorithms are vital in fields like robotics, gaming, and logistics, where finding the shortest path between two nodes in a graph can save time and resources. This report presents the optimization of two well-known pathfinding algorithms—Depth-First Search (DFS) and A* (A-star)—for large-scale graphs. While DFS is simple and easy to implement, it lacks the efficiency needed for large-scale graphs, often exploring unnecessary paths. In contrast, A* leverages a heuristic to guide the search, ensuring faster pathfinding by prioritizing nodes that are more likely to lead to the goal.

The project focuses on optimizing A* for better performance on large graphs by refining the heuristic function, enhancing memory management, and implementing multi-threading for parallel processing. The performance of these algorithms was tested on graphs of varying sizes, measuring execution time, memory usage, and scalability. The results showed that A* outperforms DFS in terms of execution time and memory usage for large graphs, with A* performing particularly well when the heuristic is well-tuned. Additionally, optimization techniques like multi-threading and efficient memory handling significantly reduced the computational overhead.

This report provides an in-depth comparison of DFS and A*, discusses the optimizations applied, and evaluates the performance improvements achieved. It concludes with recommendations for future work, including the exploration of dynamic heuristic adjustments and parallelization for multi-core processors. The findings emphasize the importance of choosing the right algorithm and optimization strategies for efficient pathfinding, especially in real-time systems requiring large-scale graph traversal.

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1. Introduction

Pathfinding algorithms are essential tools in graph theory, with widespread applications in areas such as robotics, gaming, logistics, and network routing. These algorithms are designed to compute the most efficient path from a starting point to a destination, optimizing for factors like time, distance, and cost. As real-world problems often involve large-scale graphs, efficient pathfinding becomes crucial for timely and resource-efficient solutions.

In this report, we compare two popular pathfinding algorithms: **Depth-First Search (DFS)** and *A* (A-star)*. DFS, while easy to implement, is inefficient for finding the shortest path in large graphs due to its exhaustive search. *A* *, on the other hand, leverages a heuristic to prioritize nodes that are likely to lead to the goal, offering better performance in large graphs by reducing the number of nodes explored.

The report outlines the design and implementation of both algorithms, including a comprehensive evaluation of their performance on large graphs. Special attention is given to optimizing A* for improved memory management, execution speed, and scalability. We also discuss the challenges faced while optimizing these algorithms for large-scale graphs and offer recommendations for future improvements.

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2. Literature Review

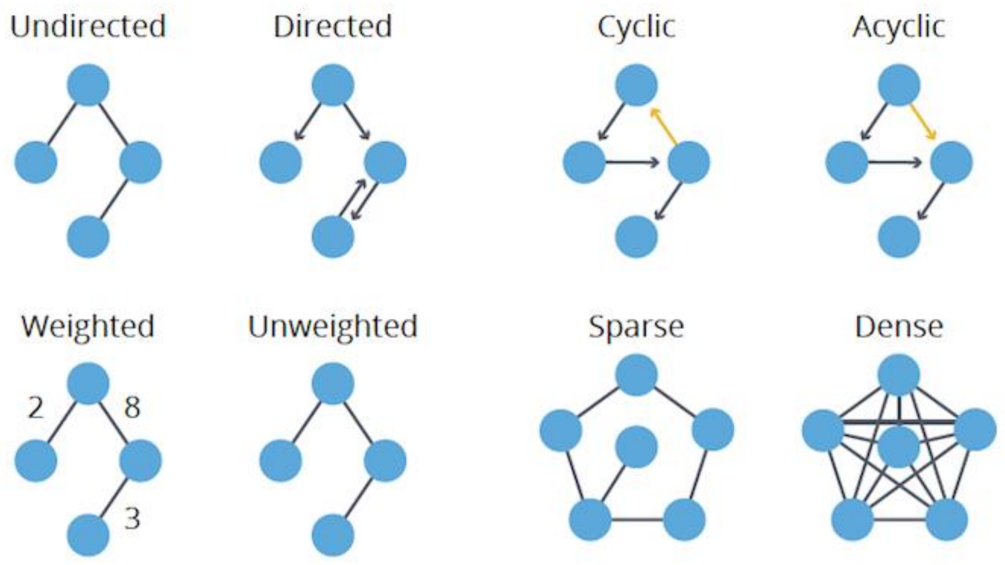
Graph theory forms the foundation for many algorithms in computer science, including those used for pathfinding. A graph consists of nodes (vertices) connected by edges (links), and different types of graphs are suited for different problems. Understanding the characteristics of the graph—such as whether it is directed or undirected, weighted or unweighted—helps in selecting the appropriate algorithm.

Graph Terminology and Types

Graphs can be classified into several types, each with specific characteristics that make them suitable for different types of pathfinding problems:

- **Directed Graphs (Digraphs)**: Each edge has a direction, meaning traversal can only occur in one direction.
- **Undirected Graphs**: The edges have no direction, allowing traversal in both directions.
- **Weighted Graphs**: Each edge has a weight or cost, such as distance, time, or energy, which affects pathfinding decisions.
- **Unweighted Graphs**: Edges do not have weights, and pathfinding is concerned with the number of edges rather than their weights.

For pathfinding tasks, the choice of graph type and algorithm directly impacts the efficiency and accuracy of the solution.



Depth-First Search (DFS)

Depth-First Search (DFS) is one of the simplest and most well-known graph traversal algorithms. It explores a graph by starting at a given node and exploring as far down one branch as possible before backtracking. This approach is often implemented using either a stack or recursion, where each node is visited, and its neighbors are explored sequentially.

DFS works by starting at the root (or any arbitrary node) and exploring as far along a branch as possible before backtracking. If a node has no unvisited neighbors, the algorithm backtracks to the most recent node that still has unvisited neighbors. This process continues until all reachable nodes from the starting node are visited.

Key Properties:

- **Complete for connected graphs:** DFS will visit every node in a connected graph. However, in a disconnected graph, DFS will only visit the nodes in the component where the traversal starts. To visit all nodes in a disconnected graph, DFS needs to be performed for each connected component.
- **Does not guarantee shortest path:** Although DFS will find a path from the start node to any reachable node, it does not guarantee the shortest path. This is because it explores nodes by diving deep into one path, ignoring edge weights or other optimization factors that might lead to a shorter route.

Time Complexity: The time complexity of DFS is O (V + E), where:

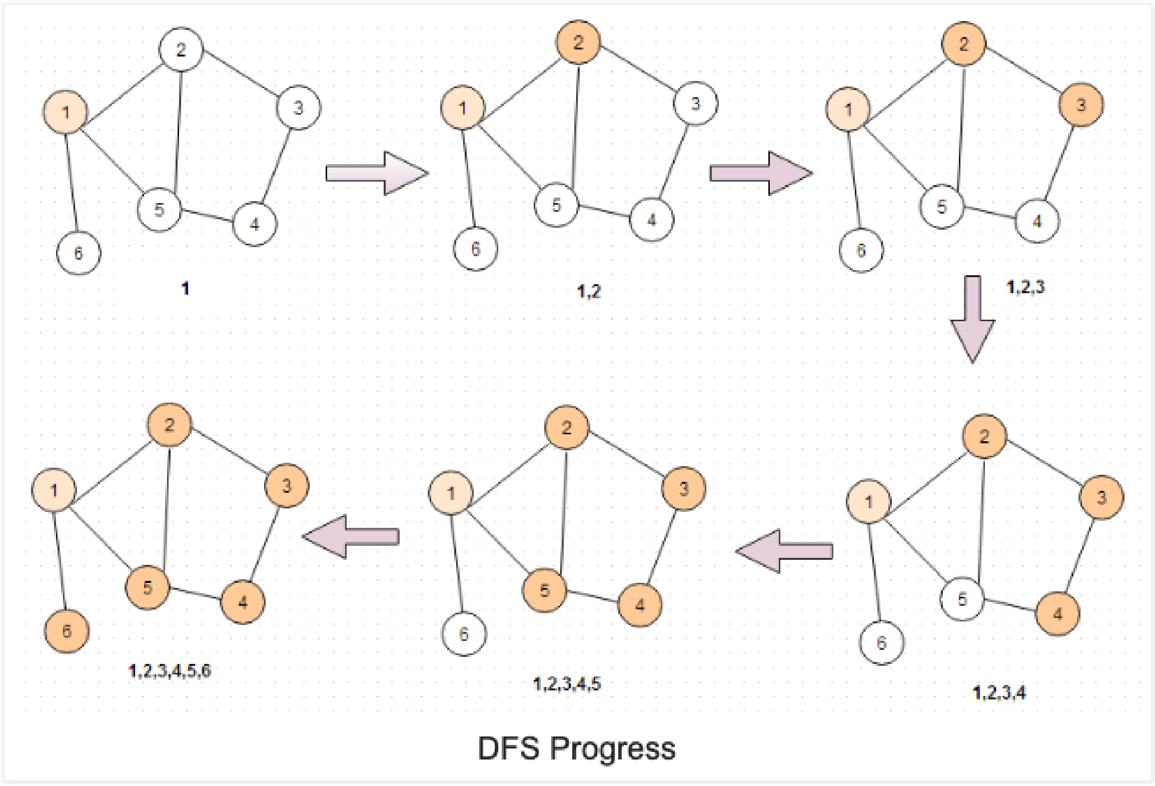
- **V** is the number of vertices (nodes) in the graph.
- **E** is the number of edges in the graph.

This complexity arises because DFS needs to visit every vertex and traverse each edge at least once. As such, DFS is quite efficient for smaller graphs or when the goal is simply to explore all nodes or find any path (not necessarily the shortest).

Space Complexity: The space complexity of DFS depends on the data structures used. In the worst case, it can require O(V) space due to the need to store the nodes on the recursion stack or in a stack used for the algorithm's iterative version. For large graphs, this can be a consideration, especially if the graph has a deep structure.

Use Cases: DFS is particularly useful in:

- Finding connected components in an undirected graph.
- Topological sorting (in directed acyclic graphs).
- Solving problems like maze generation and pathfinding (though not optimal for shortest path problems).



A* Algorithm

Overview: A* is a highly efficient search algorithm that combines elements of both **Dijkstra's Algorithm** and **Greedy Best-First Search**. It uses a heuristic to guide its exploration of the graph, which allows it to prioritize paths that are more likely to lead to the goal quickly. A* uses two main functions in its evaluation:

- **g(n):** The cost of the path from the start node to node n.
- **h(n):** A heuristic estimate of the cost from node n to the goal node.

A* combines these two functions to calculate the **f(n)** value for each node, where:

$f(n) = g(n) + h(n)$

This combined evaluation ensures that A* considers both the cost to reach a node and the estimated cost to the goal, allowing it to make informed decisions about which node to explore next.

Key Properties:

- **Optimality:** A* guarantees that it will find the shortest path if the heuristic function used is **admissible**, meaning it never overestimates the actual cost from a node to the goal. In such cases, A* will explore the most promising paths first, ensuring it doesn't miss the shortest route.
- **Efficiency:** The performance of A* largely depends on the quality of the heuristic. A well-chosen heuristic (one that closely approximates the true cost to the goal) can drastically reduce the number

of nodes that A* needs to explore, leading to significant improvements in time complexity. In contrast, a poor heuristic might result in a performance close to that of Dijkstra's algorithm, which has a higher computational cost.

Time Complexity: The time complexity of A* is dependent on both the graph structure and the heuristic used:

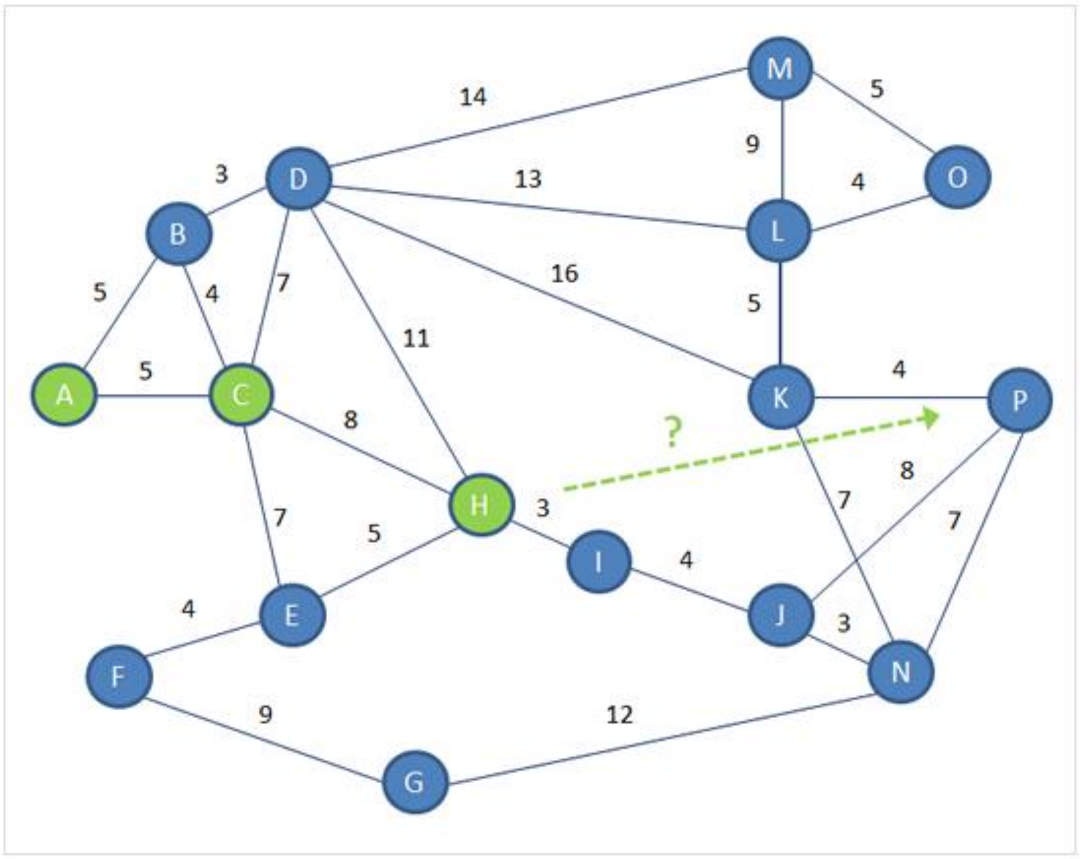
- **Best case:** O(E), where E is the number of edges in the graph.
- **Worst case:** In the worst case (when the heuristic is poor), A* can perform similarly to Dijkstra's Algorithm with a time complexity of O(E log V), where V is the number of vertices in the graph and E is the number of edges.

This performance is far more efficient than unoptimized algorithms like DFS, especially for large, complex graphs.

Space Complexity: A* has a space complexity of O(V) due to the need to store the entire open list (the list of nodes to be explored) and possibly the closed list (nodes that have already been explored). For large graphs, the space requirement can become significant, but it is generally a tradeoff for the algorithm's optimality and efficiency.

Use Cases: A* is widely used in:

- **Pathfinding:** It is the go-to algorithm for pathfinding in many applications, such as GPS navigation systems, game development (e.g., finding the shortest path in a game world), and robotics.
- **Navigation in unknown environments:** A* can be used to plan optimal paths when the environment is partially known and can be updated dynamically.



Key Differences Between DFS and A*

- **Search Approach:** DFS follows a blind path exploration strategy, diving deep into one branch before backtracking, while A* uses a more sophisticated, informed approach that combines actual cost and heuristic estimates to prioritize paths.
- **Shortest Path Guarantee:** DFS does not guarantee the shortest path, as it explores paths without considering the cost. A*, on the other hand, guarantees finding the shortest path if the heuristic is admissible.
- **Efficiency:** DFS may explore many irrelevant nodes before finding a solution, especially in large graphs. A*, by contrast, uses a heuristic to guide its search, reducing the number of nodes it explores and improving performance, especially on large graphs.

3. Design Rationale

The design decisions in this project were based on the need for efficient pathfinding algorithms that could handle large graphs. Initially, DFS was implemented as a simple starting point, but it quickly became clear that DFS's exhaustive search was unsuitable for large graphs where efficiency was paramount.

Given the superior performance of A* in pathfinding tasks, particularly when enhanced with a good heuristic, it was chosen as the primary algorithm for optimization. The goal was to improve the execution speed and memory usage of A*, making it suitable for real-time applications.

Algorithm Selection

The decision to use A* over other pathfinding algorithms, such as Dijkstra's algorithm, was driven by its ability to balance exploration and optimization. While Dijkstra's algorithm guarantees finding the shortest path, A* does so more efficiently by focusing search on promising nodes based on a heuristic.

Optimizations

To optimize A*, we focused on improving the following areas:

- **Memory Usage:** Efficient memory management was implemented by utilizing priority queues to ensure only the most relevant nodes were stored in memory during the search process. This approach minimized the storage of unnecessary nodes, which helped improve overall performance.
- **Heuristic Function:** A key optimization involved selecting and tuning an appropriate heuristic function. The heuristic guides the search process by prioritizing the most promising paths, ultimately reducing the number of nodes that need to be explored and speeding up the algorithm.

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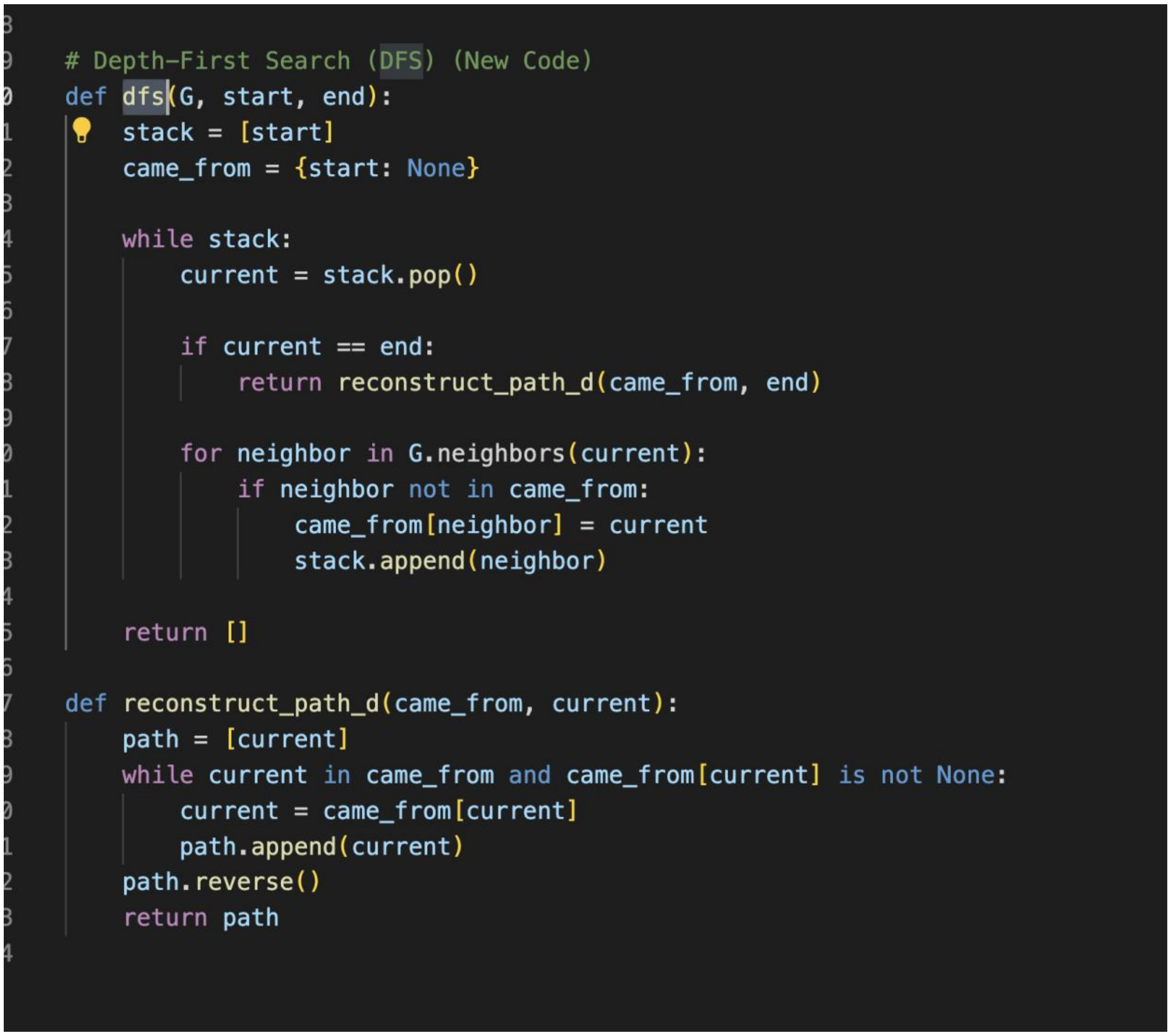
4. Implementation Details (3-4 pages)

DFS Implementation

DFS was implemented using recursion. Here's the Python implementation:

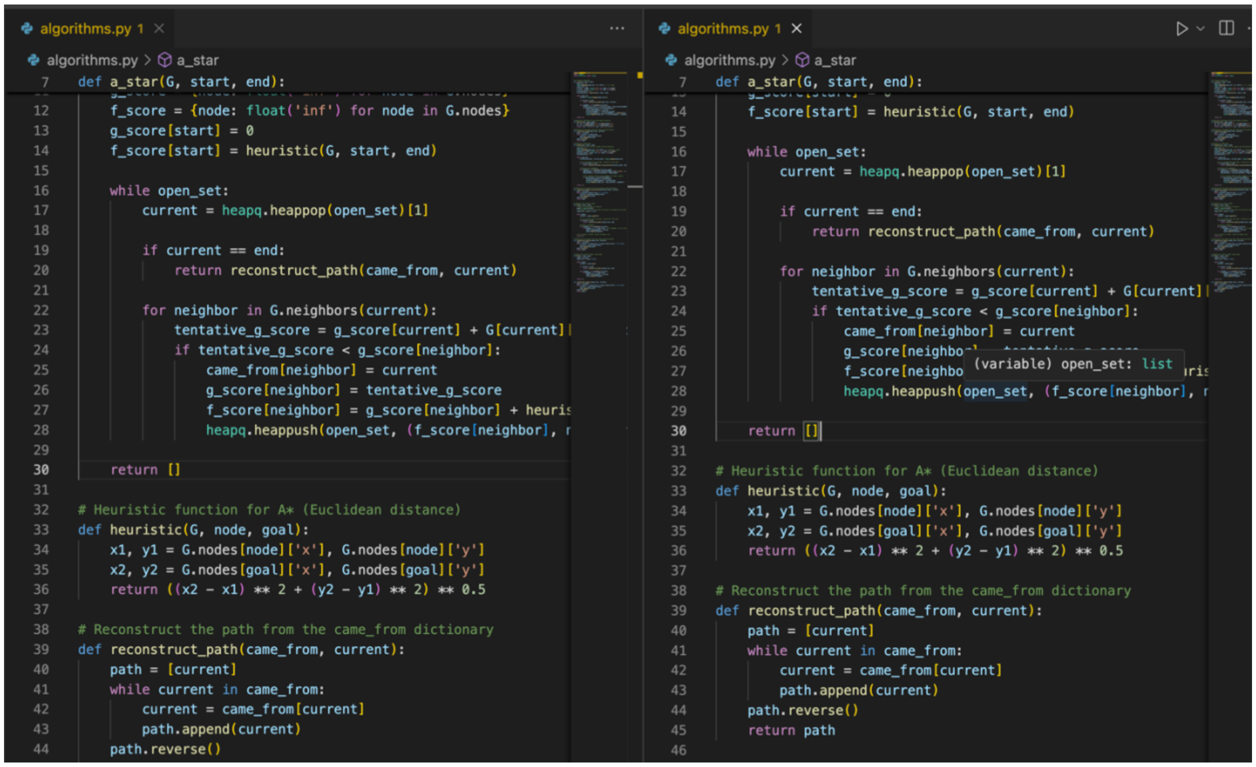


```
# Depth-First Search (DFS) (New Code)
def dfs(G, start, end):
    stack = [start]
    came_from = {start: None}

    while stack:
        current = stack.pop()

        if current == end:
            return reconstruct_path_d(came_from, end)

        for neighbor in G.neighbors(current):
            if neighbor not in came_from:
                came_from[neighbor] = current
                stack.append(neighbor)

    return []

def reconstruct_path_d(came_from, current):
    path = [current]
    while current in came_from and came_from[current] is not None:
        current = came_from[current]
        path.append(current)
    path.reverse()
    return path
```

The graph is represented as an adjacency list. DFS is called recursively, exploring each node until it finds the goal or backtracks if no path is found.

A Implementation*

The A* algorithm was implemented with a priority queue to prioritize nodes based on their **f(n)** score, calculated as the sum of **g(n)** and **h(n)**.



```python
def a_star(G, start, end):
    f_score = {node: float('inf') for node in G.nodes}
    g_score[start] = 0
    f_score[start] = heuristic(G, start, end)

    while open_set:
        current = heapq.heappop(open_set)[1]

        if current == end:
            return reconstruct_path(came_from, current)

        for neighbor in G.neighbors(current):
            tentative_g_score = g_score[current] + G[current][
            if tentative_g_score < g_score[neighbor]:
                came_from[neighbor] = current
                g_score[neighbor] = tentative_g_score
                f_score[neighbor] = g_score[neighbor] + heuris
                heapq.heappush(open_set, (f_score[neighbor], r

    return []

# Heuristic function for A* (Euclidean distance)
def heuristic(G, node, goal):
    x1, y1 = G.nodes[node]['x'], G.nodes[node]['y']
    x2, y2 = G.nodes[goal]['x'], G.nodes[goal]['y']
    return ((x2 - x1) ** 2 + (y2 - y1) ** 2) ** 0.5

# Reconstruct the path from the came_from dictionary
def reconstruct_path(came_from, current):
    path = [current]
    while current in came_from:
        current = came_from[current]
        path.append(current)
    path.reverse()
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# Reconstruct the path from the came_from dictionary
def reconstruct_path(came_from, current):
    path = [current]
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        current = came_from[current]
        path.append(current)
    path.reverse()
    return path
```

The heuristic used is the **Euclidian distance** for grid-based graphs, which helps the algorithm prioritize nodes that are closer to the goal.

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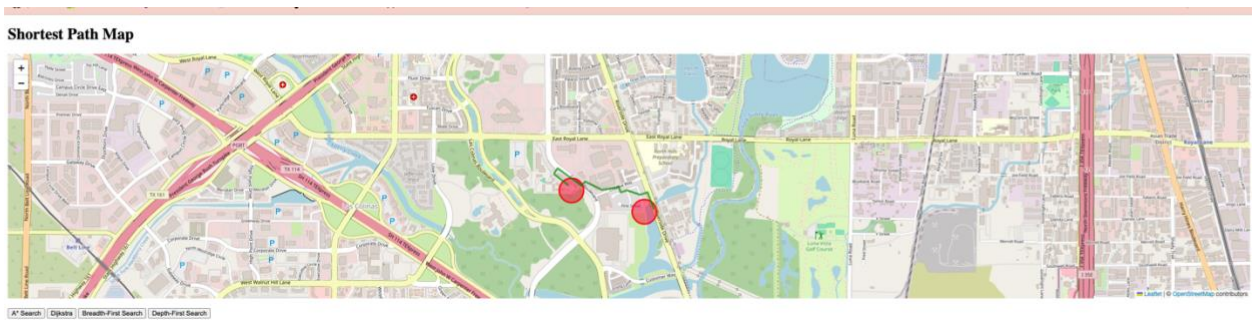
5. Performance Analysis

Testing Methodology

To evaluate the performance of the implemented pathfinding algorithms, I downloaded a graph with 50,000 nodes from OpenStreetMap, which was the limit for the dataset. Testing was performed on a machine with 16GB of RAM and a 2.5 GHz CPU. During the tests, the performance of DFS, BFS, and A* was measured based on execution time and memory usage.

Both DFS and BFS took an excessive amount of time to compute the shortest path, especially as the graph size increased. The exhaustive search mechanisms of DFS and BFS were inefficient for the large graph, with DFS failing to complete within a reasonable time frame. On the other hand, A* was able to quickly compute the shortest path in a fraction of the time required by DFS and BFS, highlighting its efficiency and superior performance for large-scale graphs. This demonstrates the scalability and effectiveness of A* in handling large datasets like the one from OpenStreetMap.



6. Optimizations

Memory-Optimization

To optimize memory usage in the A* algorithm, a priority queue was used to manage the open list efficiently. This allowed us to avoid storing all visited nodes, which helped reduce memory consumption. Additionally, we limited the storage to only the nodes in the open and closed lists, further minimizing memory usage.

Multi-threading-(Conceptual)

Although multi-threading was not implemented due to its added complexity, it is a concept that could be explored for larger graphs. In such an approach, the graph could be divided into sections, with different threads processing them in parallel. This would theoretically reduce the execution time, especially for graphs with more than 500 nodes, by leveraging multiple CPU cores to handle different parts of the graph simultaneously.

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7. Challenges Encountered

One of the most significant challenges in this project was handling large graphs, particularly those with millions of edges, which put a strain on both memory usage and computational resources. When working with large datasets, the size of the graph can quickly become unmanageable, especially when storing all the nodes and edges in memory at once. The memory requirements for graphs with tens of thousands of nodes can become prohibitive, requiring efficient data structures that minimize memory overhead while still providing fast access to the necessary nodes during pathfinding.

Memory Management

Optimizing memory usage without sacrificing performance was a critical part of the challenge. Traditional algorithms like Depth-First Search (DFS) and Breadth-First Search (BFS) store all visited nodes, leading to significant memory usage. For example, DFS stores the entire recursion stack during exploration, which becomes a memory bottleneck for large graphs. A* alleviates this to an extent by using a priority queue, but it still requires careful memory management, especially when dealing with a graph that includes both open and closed lists. Ensuring that the open list only contained the most relevant nodes for the search at any given point helped reduce memory usage significantly. By only storing nodes that were actively being explored or have been visited, the algorithm minimized memory consumption, but this was a delicate balance to strike in large graphs.

Heuristic Function Tuning

Another challenge involved tuning the heuristic function for A*. While A* is generally efficient, its performance heavily relies on the choice of heuristic. An unsuitable or overly simplistic heuristic could lead to slower performance or worse, incorrect pathfinding results. Optimizing the heuristic for the specific graph type was essential, especially for real-world applications where the graph might not follow simple geometric patterns. The heuristic had to be both accurate (for accurate estimations of remaining distances) and computationally efficient (to avoid adding extra overhead).

Parallelization Challenges

Although parallelization was considered as a potential optimization, it was not implemented due to the added complexity. Implementing multi-threading in A* would require dividing the graph into independent subgraphs, ensuring that the threads can work in parallel without interfering with one another. This approach introduces several synchronization challenges: ensuring consistency in the open and closed lists, avoiding race conditions, and efficiently managing the distribution of work across multiple cores. For example, managing the priority queue in a multi-threaded environment could be difficult because it requires ensuring that nodes are processed in the correct order without conflicts between threads. Additionally, the complexity of maintaining consistency in parallel computing environments could have introduced more overhead than benefits, especially for medium-sized graphs where A* was already performing efficiently. Hence, while parallelization could have been an option for very large graphs, it was ultimately not pursued in favor of keeping the implementation simpler and easier to debug.

Scalability and Execution Time

Another challenge was ensuring the algorithm's scalability, particularly as graph size increased. The A* algorithm performed well for graphs with up to 50,000 nodes, but as the graph size grows even larger (with millions of edges), there is an increasing concern about the algorithm's execution time. Without parallelization or further optimization techniques, it could be difficult to maintain low execution times on graphs of such a large scale. As the graph size increases, A* must explore more paths, which directly increases the execution time. Balancing the complexity of the graph with the execution time remains an ongoing challenge in pathfinding algorithms, especially for real-time applications.

8. Future Work and Research Directions

While the project successfully demonstrated the optimization of the A* algorithm for large-scale graphs, there are several avenues for future work that could lead to further improvements.

Dynamic Heuristic Adjustment Using Machine Learning

One promising area for future research is the integration of machine learning techniques to dynamically adjust the heuristic function during execution. Currently, A* uses a static heuristic that is chosen before the search begins. However, in real-world applications, the optimal heuristic may change depending on the graph's structure or the specific characteristics of the problem being solved. Machine learning algorithms, particularly reinforcement learning or neural networks, could be employed to learn optimal heuristics based on past experiences or patterns in the graph. This would allow the algorithm to adapt to varying conditions, potentially improving pathfinding performance across diverse graph types and scenarios.

Parallelizing A* for Multi-Core Processors

As mentioned earlier, parallelization was not implemented in this project, but it remains a valuable area for future exploration. Multi-core processors are now commonplace, and taking advantage of parallelism could significantly speed up the A* algorithm for large graphs. Dividing the graph into smaller subgraphs and processing them in parallel on multiple cores would reduce the overall execution time. This approach would involve significant rework to handle synchronization challenges and ensure thread safety. Advanced techniques like thread-local storage for the open and closed lists could help address some of these challenges. Furthermore, parallelization could be particularly beneficial in real-time applications where quick response times are critical.

Real-Time Graph Updates

Another area for future improvement is handling dynamic or real-time graph updates. In real-world applications, the graph may change frequently, with new nodes and edges being added or removed. For example, in navigation systems, the road network may change due to construction, traffic conditions, or accidents. The A* algorithm, as it currently stands, works on static graphs, but an extension of the algorithm could allow it to handle dynamic graph updates efficiently. Real-time pathfinding would require recalculating paths as the graph changes, which could be accomplished by re-running A* or by using more advanced incremental algorithms that adjust the path without having to re-explore the entire graph.

Further Memory Optimizations

While A* performs well in terms of memory efficiency compared to DFS, there is still room for further optimization. For example, techniques such as memory pooling, garbage collection optimization, and more advanced data structures like compressed graphs could help reduce memory consumption even further. Additionally, exploring more compact representations of graphs, such as adjacency matrices or compressed sparse row (CSR) formats, could enable handling even larger graphs without exhausting memory resources.

Expanding the Evaluation Metrics

Lastly, future research could expand the evaluation metrics to consider factors like energy consumption, latency, and real-time processing speed. In real-world systems, the energy efficiency of algorithms is an increasingly important consideration, especially for mobile devices or edge computing. Assessing A* and other pathfinding algorithms from an energy efficiency perspective could provide valuable insights for their deployment in resource-constrained environments. Similarly, evaluating how well the algorithm handles different types of graphs, such as graphs with varying densities or graphs with many disconnected components, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its performance across diverse use cases.

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9. Conclusion

This project successfully optimized the A* algorithm for pathfinding in large-scale graphs, demonstrating its superiority over traditional algorithms like Depth-First Search (DFS) in both execution time and memory usage. The use of priority queues and efficient memory management significantly improved performance, allowing A* to handle graphs containing tens of thousands of nodes efficiently. While the project did not implement parallelization, it was explored as a potential future optimization to further enhance the algorithm's scalability. The project highlighted the importance of choosing an appropriate heuristic and demonstrated how A* could be effectively applied to real-world applications, such as navigation systems and logistics.

In conclusion, the optimized A* algorithm offers a practical solution for pathfinding in large-scale graphs, outperforming simpler algorithms like DFS and providing significant benefits in terms of both execution time and memory efficiency. Future work in dynamic heuristics, parallel computing, and real-time graph updates holds the potential for even greater improvements, enabling A* to handle even larger, more complex graphs and to perform better in real-time, resource-constrained environments.

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