

Automatic Protoboard Layout

by

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Abstract

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

What problem are we solving?

1.2 Motivation

Why is this an interesting problem?

1.3 Goal

Precisely state the goal of this project. In particular, explain that we ultimately want to make a teaching tool for 6.01.

1.4 Outline

How is the Thesis organized?

Chapter 2

Background

2.1 Technical Background

What is a circuit schematic? What is a protoboard? What circuit components are we working with in this project?

2.2 Previous Work

2.2.1 Current tools in 6.01

Discuss CMax and its capabilities.

2.2.2 Current work in automatic protoboard layout

What similar work has been done before?

Chapter 3

Evaluation

How are we going to evaluate a particular solution to the problem?

Chapter 4

Methods

In this Section, I discuss my solution to the problem and various alternatives I considered along the way.

4.1 Overview

I solved this problem by formulating it as a search problem. By this I mean, given a schematic of a circuit, I start from an empty protoboard, and I search through the space of all possible protoboard layouts to find the protoboard corresponding to the schematic at hand. The space of all possible protoboards is very large (?), so I utilize various simplifications and heuristics to facilitate the search.

I broke down the problem into two parts. The first task is finding a placement of all the circuit pieces on the protoboard. The second task is wiring them up appropriately.

4.2 Part 1: Piece Placement

Let us first consider how to place a set of circuit pieces on the protoboard for a given circuit schematic.

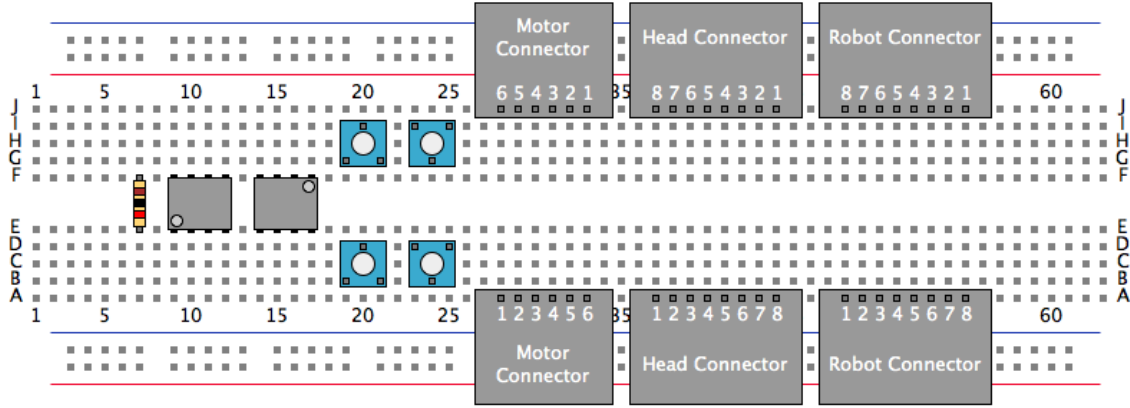


Figure 4-1: Various acceptable ways of putting each of the circuit pieces on the protoboard.

4.2.1 The Pieces

Any given circuit may contain resistors, Op Amps, pots, motors, head connector parts, or robot connector parts. For each of these components, we must put down a corresponding piece on the protoboard.

Resistors

For the sake of simplicity, and to significantly reduce the search space (?), for every resistor in the schematic, I use one resistor piece on the protoboard placed in the middle strip of the protoboard as shown in Figure 4-1. This choice, i.e. allowing the resistor pieces to only reside in the middle strip of the protoboard, is critical as the resistor pieces can generally be placed at numerous places on the protoboard. With this restriction, there are 63 slots available for one resistor. Without this restriction, there are a total of 763 slots available. The restriction is good when we consider the reduction in the search space size. On the other hand, the restriction is bad when we consider the size of circuits the algorithm can layout. Given that the number of resistors in a typical 6.01 circuit is very small (?), this restriction proves to be very useful, but we will consider the alternative in Section 4.4.

n	$f(n)$
1	1
2	3
3	7
4	25
5	81
6	331
7	1303
8	5937
9	26785
10	133651

Table 4.1: Number of ways of packaging together n Op Amps for various values of n .

Op Amps

Op Amps are the trickiest components to handle because each Op Amp package put on the protoboard contains two Op Amps within it. Thus, we face the task of packaging the Op Amps in the schematic in the “best” possible way, i.e. so as to require as little work as possible when wiring the pieces together. Equation 4.1 presents an expression for the value $f(n)$, the number of different ways to package together n Op Amps. For example, if we have 2 Op Amps, we can either use one Op Amp package for each, or put them both in the same package, which we can do in one of two different ways. Hence, $f(2) = 3$. To get a sense of how many different packagings are possible, Table 4.2.1 gives the values of $f(n)$ for various n .

$$f(n) = \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \rfloor} \frac{n!}{k!(n-2k)!} \quad (4.1)$$

Each Op Amp package is placed in the middle strip of the protoboard, with two acceptable orientations, as shown in Figure 4-1.

Pots

Each pot piece can be placed in one of two vertical locations on the protoboard. Each pot piece also has two possible orientations. Figure 4-1 provides examples of all acceptable options.

Head, Motor, and Robot Connectors

We use a 6-pin connector to connect to a motor, and an 8-pin connector to connect to either a head or a robot. Each connector can be placed in one of two vertical locations on the protoboard, as shown in Figure 4-1.

4.2.2 Choosing a Placement

When choosing a placement of circuit pieces on the protoboard, we have at hand a plethora of options. First we must choose among a possibly large number of ways to package together the Op Amps in the circuit. For each possible packaging of Op Amps, we must consider various ways of placing the pieces on the protoboard.

Simplifications

I reduce this large number of options by only allowing placements in which no two pieces share a column. Once again, this is not necessary in general, but the number of pieces necessary for a typical 6.01 circuit would certainly fit in this framework.

Next, I specify that there be exactly two columns on the protoboard separating each consecutive pair of pieces, unless the pieces are both resistors, in which case there must be exactly one column separating them. These numbers of columns were chosen to leave enough space for wiring. Given a set of pieces to be put on the protoboard, this specification reduces the problem of choosing a placement for the pieces to finding an *order* of the pieces together with choosing their respective vertical locations and orientations.

Given these simplifications, we have various options as to how to pick a placement.

Random Placement

One simple alternative may be to choose a placement randomly. That is, we choose an Op Amp packaging randomly; we choose an order of the pieces randomly; and we choose the vertical locations and orientations of the pieces randomly as well. The advantage of this approach is that it gives us a placement very quickly without

requiring much computation. On the other hand, we may end up placing two pieces that need to be connected to each other very far apart, and we will have a difficult time doing the wiring. Hence, we ought to consider alternatives in which we take into account the task of wiring. We should try to place the pieces so as to require as little work during wiring as possible.

Minimal Heuristic Cost

The key idea is that if two pieces are meant to be connected together by wires, then they ought to be placed close to each other on the protoboard. We can capture this idea by assigning heuristic costs to the placements and choosing a placement that produces the minimal heuristic cost.

Let us first devise the cost function to achieve this goal. Given a circuit schematic and a corresponding placement of the circuit pieces on the protoboard, what do we need to connect with wires? Well, every pair of components in the schematic that are connected by a wire gives us a corresponding pair of locations on the protoboard that ought to be connected by wires. However, we can express this requirement a little bit more concisely. We ought to consider all of the nodes in the schematic, and find the circuit components in the schematic that are connected to the respective nodes. Now for each node in the circuit, we get a set of locations on the protoboard that ought to be interconnected. The first step in devising the cost function we are looking for is to have a way to estimate the cost of connecting two locations on the protoboard. A simple such cost function that comes to mind is the Manhattan distance between the two locations. Recall that we want to produce aesthetically pleasing protoboard layouts, and one of the requirements in achieving this goal is only using horizontal and vertical wires (i.e. no diagonal wires) so the Manhattan distance cost is appropriate. Given this heuristic cost for connecting two locations with wires, we can define the heuristic cost for interconnecting the locations associated with a particular node to be the weight of the minimum spanning tree of the locations. Now we can define the cost of a placement to be the sum over all nodes in the circuit of the cost for interconnecting the locations for each node.

Now that we have a cost function for placements, we can aim to find a placement with the minimal cost. However, this involves trying all possible orderings of the pieces with which we are working. For example, if we are trying to order 10 pieces, we would need to look at $10! = 3628800$ possible orderings (?). Note that this is in addition to searching over all possible ways of packaging the Op Amps together. It is clear to see that the search for a minimal cost placement quickly gets out of hand. So we aim to find a placement that has a very small, though maybe not minimal, cost.

Small Heuristic Cost

Algorithm 1 presents a polynomial-time procedure that orders a given list of pieces in a way that results in a small cost. The algorithm places one of the pieces at a time, starting from an empty placement. It relies on two ideas. First, once a piece has been placed, all the pieces that are connected to it will be placed soon after so that it is more likely that those pieces are placed close to it. Second, we place the pieces with the most nodes first since those are the ones that most likely have connections with many other pieces.

Algorithm 1: Producing a circuit piece placement with small heuristic cost.

Data: A list P of circuit pieces.

Result: A list R of circuit pieces representing a placement.

Sort P in decreasing number of nodes on the respective pieces

$Q \leftarrow$ empty Queue

$R \leftarrow$ empty List

while P is not empty **do**

 Pop the first piece in P and push it onto Q

while Q is not empty **do**

$p \leftarrow Q.\text{pop}()$

 Consider all vertical locations and orientations of p

 Place p at an index in R that minimizes the cost of P

foreach piece q in P connected to p **do**

 Pop q out of P and push it onto Q

Using one of the above methods, we can find a placement of circuit pieces on a protoboard. Our next task is wiring them together to produce a circuit equivalent to

the circuit schematic of interest.

4.3 Part 2: Wiring

In the previous section we discussed what locations we need to wire together: for every node in the circuit, we get a set of locations on the protoboard that need to be interconnected. The question now is how to achieve this wiring. We approach the problem as a search problem and use the A^* search algorithm to solve it.

4.3.1 Using A^*

When using the A^* algorithm, we need to design four things:

1. The notion of a vertex¹ in the search tree, the cost associated with a vertex, and how we obtain the neighbors of a vertex,
2. The starting vertex,
3. How we identify whether a particular vertex in the search tree achieves the goal of the search, and
4. A heuristic function that estimates the distance from a given vertex to a goal vertex.

4.3.2 Vertices

Each vertex will hold a representation of some protoboard. Each representation will contain all of the pieces, and possibly a set of wires interconnecting the pieces. The starting vertex will have all of the pieces but no wires.

We obtain the neighbors of a vertex by taking the current protoboard and producing new ones in which we place exactly one wire at various locations. We choose the starting point of a wire to be any one of the free locations on the protoboard

¹The preferred name is “node” but I will use vertex since we already use node to refer to nodes in circuits.

that is already connected to one of the pieces, and we extend the wires in all possible vertical and horizontal directions up to some fixed wire length. Note that we need to take great care when placing wires in order not to short different nodes. We discard any vertices that arise from placing a wire that shorts two different nodes.

The way we define the cost of a vertex, i.e. the cost of getting from the starting vertex to a vertex of interest, depends on what we consider to be an aesthetically pleasing protoboard layout. In general, we want to penalize having long wires, many wires, or crossing wires. In my implementation, while I have a large penalty for two crossing wires of opposite orientations (i.e. vertical and horizontal), I do not allow crossing wires that have the same orientation as this configuration is particularly difficult to physically build and debug. Finally, we want to favor making a desired interconnection between locations on the protoboard. I chose my penalties experimentally (?).

Each vertex will not only hold a protoboard, but it will also hold a set of pairs of locations on the protoboard that need to be connected by wires. Each pair (loc_1, loc_2) of locations tells us that we need to have a set of wires connecting some location connected to loc_1 to some location connected to loc_2 .

An important consideration we need to make is how we want to organize the search. Recall that we have a set of nodes in the circuit of interest, and for each node we have a set of locations that need to be interconnected. Given this information, we may choose one of the following three strategies to carryout the search:

1. For each node, collect a set of pairs of locations on the protoboard corresponding to a minimum spanning tree of the locations for that node, so that if all pairs of locations in this spanning tree are connected, then the locations for the node will be interconnected. Collect all such pairs of locations for all of the nodes in the circuit, and have the starting vertex hold this set of pairs of locations.
2. Treat each node separately. That is, iteratively interconnect the locations for each of the nodes until there are no more nodes in the circuit.
3. Treat each pair of locations that needs to be connected separately. That is,

iteratively connect pairs of locations that need to be connected until there are no more pairs.

The choice of one of these strategies has a significant effect on the outcome of the search. We will discuss the difference in detail in Chapter 5.

4.3.3 Goal test

Given a vertex, we know that it is a goal vertex if all of the pairs of locations it holds are already connected in the protoboard it holds.

4.3.4 Search heuristic

In A^* search, choosing the right heuristic can often make the search much more efficient. In our problem, one option we have is not to use a heuristic, and that alternative will be explored in Chapter 5. However there is a natural heuristic that suggests itself that we ought to consider. Given a vertex, we can estimate its distance from a goal as follows. For each pair of locations (loc_1, loc_2) that need to be connected, we could consider its distance from the goal to be the smallest Manhattan distance between any location connected to loc_1 and any other location connected to loc_2 . To compute the heuristic cost of a vertex, we simply add up this value for each of the pairs of locations that need to be connected. Chapter 5 presents the performance of this heuristic verses using no heuristic.

4.4 Treating Resistors as Wires

The discussion in Section 4.2.1 presented that we treat resistors just as we do the other components. That is, we give each resistor a fixed place on the protoboard in the first step of the algorithm before the wiring step. However, resistors have the special property among the circuit pieces that they can be thought of as wires of length 3. Hence, it may be possible to handle resistors in the wiring step instead of the placement step. Chapter 5 presents a comparison of these two approaches.

Note that treating resistors in the wiring step is not a trivial task. First, there may be nodes in the circuit that are connected to some resistors, but no other pieces. In this case, we must be sure to reserve space on the protoboard for that node as the wiring step relies on the presence of each node on the protoboard. Second, we must keep careful track of pairs of locations that need to be connected by simple wires and pairs of locations that need to be connected using resistors.

Chapter 5

Results

Quantitatively compare the various methods discussed in the previous section.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Explaining the Results

Give plausible explanation for the observed results.

6.2 Remarks

Why are these results encouraging? What are their implications? Relate back to Introduction to Thesis. What could have been done differently?

Appendix A

Schematic Drawing GUI

Discuss the features and capabilities of the GUI.