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The Traveling Salesman Problem Exact and Approximate Algorithms

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Introduction

The traveling salesman problem (which will be denoted by TSP for brevity's sake) is a classic problem in computer science. It is a typical example of a combinatorial optimization problem, that is, an optimization problem with a *discrete* solution space.

In its simplest form, the TSP asks the following question: "A salesman wants to take *the best*[1] *possible itenerary* between a set of cities, every city must be visited exactly once, and the salesman must start and finish at the same city. How can he find this itenerary?"

It is not dificult to see the practical use of solving the TSP. In fact, many important problems like vehicle routing, scheduling, array clustering [3], and circuit design [2] can be *expressed*[2] as TSP instances.

Furthermore, the TSP is of particular theoretical interest to complexity theory researchers, as its decision variant a member of a very important family of decision problems called NP-complete problems.

In this document, we will introduce the TSP, investigate some of its properties and applications, and propose a few algorithms for solving it.

[1] Usually "best" means shortest.

[2] Formally speaking, these problems can be *reduced* to TSP.

Symbols and Notation

Chapter 1

General Concepts

Throughout this document, we will often find ourselevs in need of a method to objectively measure the difficulty of a problem or the efficiency of an algorithm. Fortunately, there exists an entire branch of theoretical computer science that addresses these very questions: *the theory of computational complexity.*

1.1 Computational Complexity

The theory of computational complexity is —as stated above— a branch of computer science that formalizes the intuitive concept of the *difficulty* of a problem. Quite reasonably, this discipline relies on the premise that a problem is as difficult as it is to perform its most efficient solution, or, to use technical terms, to *execute the most efficient algorithm* that solves the problem.

For historical (and technical) reasons, most of the work in this branch has been done around a special type of problem called *decision problems.* A decision problem is a problem that has a binary answer, that is, given an instance (or an input) of the problem, we compute an answer (or output) that is an element of some preknown set with cardinality 2. The sets $\{0, 1\}$, $\{\texttt{false}, \texttt{true}\}$, and $\{\texttt{no}, \texttt{yes}\}$, are common examples of such a set, the latter of which will be used in the rest of this discussion.

A decision problem can therefore be defined as the problem of evaluating some

computable[1] function $f : S \to \{0, 1\}$ where S is some set of inputs. These functions can be mapped to decidable subsets of S by associating every such a set P with its characteristic function $\mathbb{1}_P$. This correspondence is what motivates Definition 1 of decidable problems.

Definition 1 (Decision Problem)**.**
A decision problem is a pair $X = \langle S, P \rangle$ where S is a countable set called the *instance space* and $P \subset S$ is called the set of *positive instances*. We say the problem X is decidable iff P is decidable (i.e. if $\mathbb{1}_P$ is computable).

To better understand Definition 1, we consider Examples 1.1, and 1.2, the latter of which is of particular historical significance in the context of complexity theory.

Example 1.1 (A Number of Decision Problems)**.**

- PRIME is the problem $\langle \mathbb{N}, P \rangle$ where P is the set of all prime numbers.
- HAM, or the *hamiltonicity problem* is the problem $\langle S, P \rangle$ where S is the set of all undirected graphs and P is the set of all hamiltonian graphs.
- PAIR or the pairity problem is the problem $\langle \{0, 1\}^*, P \rangle$ where

$$P = \left\{ w \in \{0, 1\}^* \middle| |w|_1 \equiv 0 \bmod 2 \right\}$$

Example 1.2 (SAT)**.**
The *satesfiability problem of boolean logic*, or SAT, is the problem $\langle S, P \rangle$ where S is the set of all formulae of boolean logic and P is the set of all *satisfiable* formulae. A formula $\varphi \in S$ is satesfiable iff it has a satisfying assignment or a *model*, that is, if its negation is not a tautology.

The complexity of a decision problem is given by two pieces of information, the first being its time complexity (intuitively, this is the runtime of the *fastest* turing machine deciding the problem), and the second its space complexity (the *minimal* number of distinct visited cells on the tape of turing machine deciding the problem). The rigorous definitions of these quantities are given in Appendix A. We will use the notions of *algoorithms*, *runtime*, and *memory usage* as intuitive analogues of Turing machines, runtime and space complexity respectively.

[1]The model of computation is not important when defining decision problems, but it becomes so when discussing their complexity. The turing machine is the model we will use throughout this work.

As is common when discussing complexity, we will sort problems in a hierarchy of *complexity classes*. These complexity classes are based on the asymptotic behaviour of the time and space complexities instead of the exact runtime or memory usage of a particular algorithm solving a particular problem. A few important complexity classes are given by Definition 2 [1].

Definition 2 (Most Important Complexity Classes)**.**
Let $f : \mathbb{N} \to \mathbb{R}_+$ be a function. We define the following classes of problems:

- $\mathsf{TIME}(f(n))$ is the set of probelms X for which there exists a deterministic Turing machine $\mathcal{M}$ that decides X such that $t_{\mathcal{M}}(n) = O(f(n))$.
- $\mathsf{NTIME}(f(n))$ is the set of probelms X for which there exists a nondeterministic Turing machine $\mathcal{M}$ that decides X such that $t_{\mathcal{M}}(n) = O(f(n))$.

From these two, we can define the following classes:

$$\mathsf{P} = \bigcup_{k\in\mathbb{N}} \mathsf{TIME}\left(n^k\right) \qquad \mathsf{NP} = \bigcup_{k\in\mathbb{N}} \mathsf{NTIME}\left(n^k\right)$$

$$\mathsf{EXPTIME} = \bigcup_{k\in\mathbb{N}} \mathsf{TIME}\left(2^{n^k}\right) \qquad \mathsf{NEXPTIME} = \bigcup_{k\in\mathbb{N}} \mathsf{NTIME}\left(2^{n^k}\right)$$

The list of complexity classes given by Definition 2 is of course far from complete. It is however largely sufficient for the purposes of this investigation. In fact, we will mostly be dealing with the classes P and NP exclusively.

Chapter 2

Problem Statement

2.1 History

The first use of the term 'traveling salesman problem' in mathematical circles may have been in 1931-32, as we shall explain below. But in 1832, a book was printed in Germany entitled Der Handlungsreisende, wie er sein soil und was er zu thun hat, um Auftrage zu erhalten und eines glucklichen Erfolgs in seines Geschdften gewiss zu sein. Von einem alien Commis- Voyageur ("The Traveling Salesman, how he should be and what he should do to get Commissions and to be Successful in his Business. By a veteran Traveling Salesman').

Although devoted for the most part to other issues, the book reaches the essence of the TSP in its last chapter: 'By a proper choice and scheduling of the tour, one can often gain so much time that we have to make some suggestions.... The most important aspect is to cover as many locations as possible without visiting a location twice ...' [Voigt, 1831; MiMer-Merbach, 1983].

Chapter 3

Branch and Bound

3.1 Motivation

The direct method as we have seen is, despite the simplicity of its implementation, unrealistically slow for even very small instances.

Faster exact algorithms exist, but none of them is polynomial since TSP is NP-complete. In fact, under the assumption $P \neq NP$, no polynomial solution exists.

Branch and Bound is one such algorithm that we will dedicate the rest of the chapter to.

3.2 The idea of Branch and Bound

The idea of Branch and Bound is to eliminate certain branches from the search space to decrease runtime.

This is done by computing a *lower bound* and *upper bound* for every branch, and then pruning branches that are garanted to be worse than the best known solution.

3.3 The implementation

Appendix A

Computability

Appendix B

Test

Bibliography

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[3] *THE TRAVELING SALESMAN PROBLEM A Guided Tour of Combinatorial Optimization*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1985.