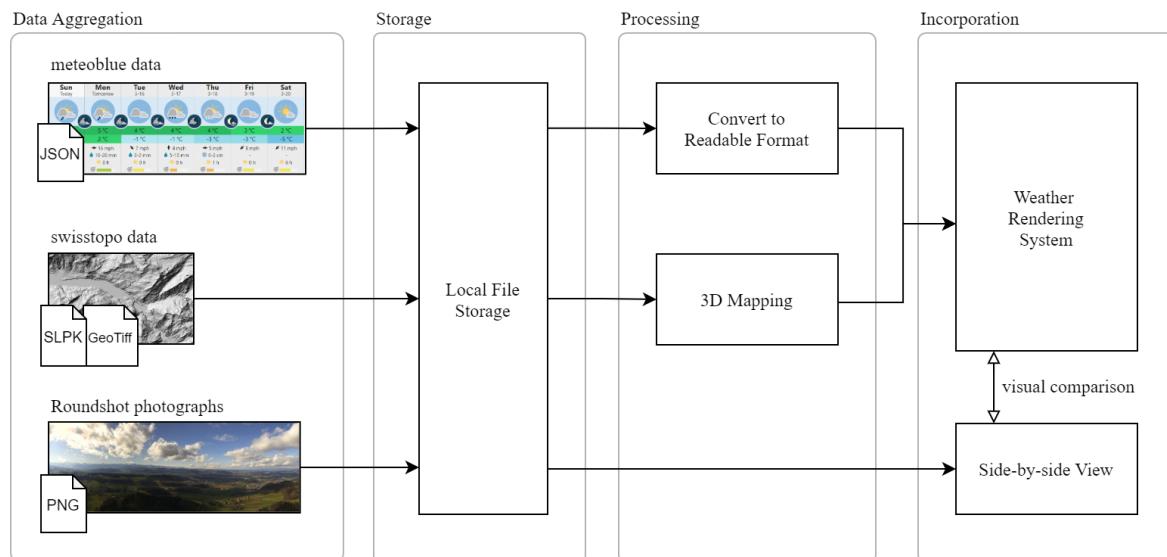




# Real-time Weather Rendering System

## Project documentation



Field of Studies:

BSc in Computer Science

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## Abstract

Clouds contribute a great deal to the overall ambience in games and can be the cherry on top by filling the sky with life. To get as close as possible to real clouds, this project engages in researching and prototyping a procedural, volumetric cloud shader.

In order to achieve volumetric rendering, the document dives into the concept of ray marching, a group of methods used to render a 3D data set inside a container box to make it appear volumetric. Several variants of it are expanded on, like constant step, traditional, and sphere-traced ray marching. Additionally, to account for perception of depth, the volume can be shaded with the aid of surface normal estimation.

In the second part, 2D and 3D noise generation algorithms like Perlin's noise and the Voronoi algorithm are explained in detail. With fractal Brownian motion, the different layers of noise are then merged into one highly detailed noise texture.

At last, the goal of the project was to create prototypes in Unity displaying both volumetric rendering and noise algorithms, of which all were created successfully. Prepared with the combined knowledge of the research results and prototypes, a final shader was created, able to render a completely procedural and volumetric cloudscape.

For future work, the shader could be expanded into a fully-fledged weather simulation system with meteorologically accurate formation of clouds, rain, snow and much more.

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# 1 General

## 1.1 Purpose

During this project, all gathered information and knowledge about the researched algorithms and techniques are written down. All prototypes and the final results are documented and compared with real photographs of clouds.

## 1.2 Audience

This document is written with the intent to further expand existing knowledge about the topic, hence it requires a fundamental knowledge about computer graphics and rendering.

## 1.3 Revision History

Version	Date	Name	Comment
0.1	March 25, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Initial draft
0.2	April 05, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Cloud classification added
0.3	April 11, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Weather fronts added
0.4	April 12, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Implementation approach added
0.5	April 13, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Alternative approach added
0.6	April 30, 2020	Matthias Thomann	Noise generation added

## 2 Natural Clouds

Clouds are a substantial part of Earth's weather. They provide shade from the glistening sun on hot days and reflect the heat at night, keeping the ground warmer. Even for a layman, clouds are comprehensible and useful indicators for telling the weather. If they are dark and low-hanging, they usually bring rain. If they are puffy and scarce, they predict fair weather ahead.

### 2.1 Convection

In meteorology, convection describes the event of atmospheric motions in the vertical direction. Hot air rises from Earth's surface in form of bubbles, which are called *thermal columns* or just *thermals*. As the altitude increases, the thermal's air cool down. At some point, the warm air diluted by the surrounding colder air, after which its moisture condenses and starts forming clouds [1].



**Figure 1:** Lifting by convection.

Typically, thermal columns occur when sunlight is warming the ground, and thus the air directly above it. However, it can also be produced by the movement of weather fronts.

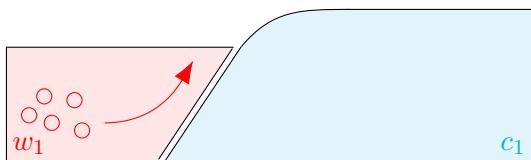
## 2.2 Weather Fronts

According to *metoffice* [2], weather fronts are boundaries between two air masses. Those masses differ in temperature, wind direction and humidity. There are three major types of weather fronts: *warm*, *cold* and *occluded* fronts.

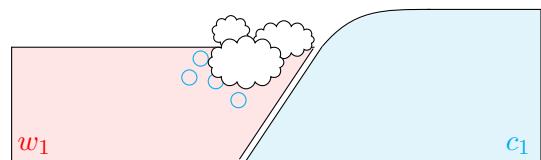
In the following graphics, the warm front is marked with  $w_1$ , while the cold front is marked with  $c_1$ .

### 2.2.1 Precipitation Along a Warm Front

When a warm front approaches a cold front, it is likely that the impending clash results in clouds, bringing precipitation. The warm front carries warmer air and therefore rises over the colder, denser air. By advancing towards a cold front, the warm front pushes its warmer air higher, which means that thermals are created and clouds start to form [3].



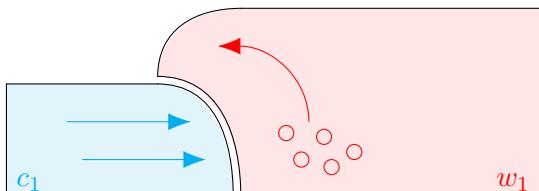
**Figure 2:** Warm front: warmer air advances, rising over the colder air, cooling down in the process.



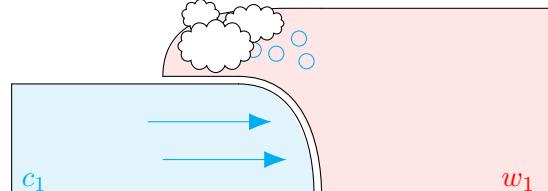
**Figure 3:** Warm front: as the air cools down, the moisture condenses. Clouds start to form.

### 2.2.2 Precipitation Along a Cold Front

A cold front represents the boundaries of an air mass carrying cold air. Like to the warm front movement, a cold front catching on a warm front can just as much produce clouds with precipitation. When trailing a warm front, thermals are produced in a similar way. As colder air is denser than warmer air, it pushes underneath it. By pushing up warm air, that air cools down as it rises, thus clouds start to develop [4].



**Figure 4:** Cold front: colder air advances, pushing the warmer air upwards, cooling it down.



**Figure 5:** Cold front: as the air cools down, the moisture condenses. Clouds start to form.

### 2.2.3 Precipitation Along an Occluded Front

There is also the phenomenon of front occlusion, producing *occluded front*. This happens when there is a warm front that is caught in the middle of two faster moving cold fronts. At some point, the preceding cold front overtakes the warm front and forces it upwards, causing thermals of warm air rising. Depending on which of the two cold fronts is colder, the outcome may change. The milder cold front is denoted with  $c_1$ , while the other cold front with much cooler air is denoted with  $c_2$ .

If the preceding cold front carries cooler air than the succeeding, the occlusion is called a *cold occlusion* [5].

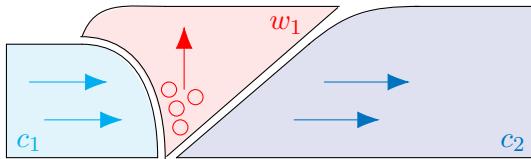


**Figure 6:** Cold occlusion: cool air catches up with a preceding cold front, forcing the warmer air inbetween to go up, creating a thermal.

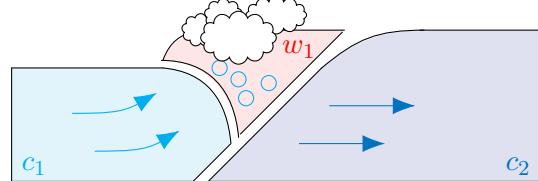


**Figure 7:** Cold occlusion: the cool air pushes underneath both other fronts. An occluded front is created, bringing heavy precipitation.

However, if the succeeding cold front is carrying cooler air than the preceding cold front, the occlusion is called *warm occlusion* [5].



**Figure 8:** Warm occlusion: a cold front catches up with a warm front preceded by cool air, forcing the warmer air inbetween to go up, creating a thermal.



**Figure 9:** Warm occlusion the cold front is forced to climb over the cool air, pushing the warm front up. An occluded front is created, bringing heavy precipitation.

## 2.3 Classifications

In order to create a weather rendering system that is able to display many different cloudscapes, all types of clouds have to be understood first. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) describes ten distinct cloud classifications. For each of those, there are further subtypes. For simplicity, those subtypes will be disregarded in this project.



**Figure 10:** Distinct classifications of cloudshapes in the troposphere [6].

This graphic above provides an excellent overview of all distinct cloud types. Each type is depicted in its signature shape and labeled with its scientific name. Natural clouds are typically identified by two major factors: shape and altitude. The altitude, which is the distance from sea level to the cloud, is further split into three categories "low", "mid" and "high". This corresponds to the altitude at which the cloud usually forms, up to eleven kilometers above ground.

All of those clouds are formed in the troposphere, Earth's lowest atmospheric layer. Certain clouds may occur in the stratospheric or even the mesospheric layer, but they are usually a rare sight. Therefore, those clouds will not be covered in this project.

### 2.3.1 Cirrus

Cirrus clouds consist of thin, hair-like strands. They fall into the "high" altitude group and mostly appear in a bright white color, although they may take on the colors of the sunset or sunrise. Typically, they are formed when water vapor undergoes desublimation, the process in which gas turns into solid. This occurs when the water vapor freezes rapidly at high altitudes, turning into ice crystals.

However, cirrus clouds can also form from air that flows outwards of thunderstorms.



**Figure 11:** Cirrus clouds [7].

**Interpretation:** Fair weather, but they might announce the arrival of warm front in 12-24 hours, which is often preceded by rain several hours in advance. Even though cirrus clouds indicate precipitation, they themselves do not produce rainfall [8].

### 2.3.2 Cirrostratus

Cirrostratus clouds are similar to the cirrus clouds, only that they are even thinner. Those clouds depict more of a veil than a single cloud shape. They form under the same conditions as the cirrus clouds and can cover a massive area of the sky, spanning thousands of kilometers.

Cirrostratus clouds sometimes produce white rings or arcs of lights around the sun or the moon called the *halo phenomenon*. Sometimes, the cirrostratus clouds are so thin that the halo is the only way to tell if there are cirrostratus clouds.



**Figure 12:** Cirrostratus clouds [9].

**Interpretation:** Fair weather, but they indicate a warm front within one or two days, bringing precipitation [10].

### 2.3.3 Cirrocumulus

Similar to the other clouds of the cirrus family, the cirrocumulus are composed of ice crystals and formed at high altitudes. They are made up of many small, white, puffy clouds called *cloudlets*. Their wooly look give the cloud the name suffix *cumulus*.

Cirrocumulus clouds are relatively rare, as they are naturally only formed when a turbulent vertical current meets a cirrus cloud layer. The cirrus cloud then disperses into many cloudlets.



**Figure 13:** Cirrocumulus clouds [11].

**Interpretation:** They do produce precipitation, but it never reaches the surface, meaning that cirrocumulus clouds are typically associated with fair weather [10].

### 2.3.4 Altostratus

The name for this grey, uniform sheet of clouds consists of the latin words *alto* (elevated) and *stratus* (layered), summing up their appearance accurately. Altostratus clouds usually cover the whole sky and form a dull blanket of monocolored clouds with very few features. The sun- or moonlight may shine through them, but will most likely not be strong enough to cast hard shadows.

**Interpretation:** Altostratus clouds usually indicate precipitation, even more so if they are preceded by cirrus clouds. If the precipitation increases in persistence and intensity, the altostratus clouds will lower and thicken into nimbostratus clouds.



Figure 14: Altostratus clouds [10].

Foto by Julian Gutbrod

### 2.3.5 Altocumulus

As with the cirrocumulus clouds, altocumulus clouds consist of small, puffy, white and grey cloudlets. These cloudlets are slightly bigger than the ones of the cirrocumulus cloud. It is easy to tell them apart, as the altocumulus cloudlets are usually more grey than white and are shaded on one side. Altocumulus clouds can form through the dispersion of altostratus clouds or through convection.

**Interpretation:** Usually, they are found in settled weather. They do not produce precipitation that reaches the surface.



Figure 15: Altocumulus clouds [12].

Foto by Julian Gutbrod

### 2.3.6 Nimbostratus

The nimbostratus clouds are the vast, grey clouds that bring heavy rain or snow for a longer period of time, sometimes up to multiple days. With their dark and gloomy appearance, they convey a dreary mood along with the persistent precipitation.

The thick, featureless layers of cloud are often formed by occluded fronts, when an altostratus starts lowering and gets denser [13].

**Interpretation:** They bring long-term rain or snow for several hours or days.



Figure 16: Nimbostratus clouds [10].

Foto by Julian Gutbrod

### 2.3.7 Stratus

Stratus clouds are low-layer clouds that usually only form in calm, stable conditions. They are often described as "high fog" as they have similarities in appearance.

Stratus clouds are formed by cool, moist air that is raised by mild wind breezes.

**Interpretation:** They indicate quiet weather conditions, but sometimes produce sprinklings of rain.



Foto by Julian Gutbrod

Figure 17: Stratus clouds [10].

### 2.3.8 Cumulus

Probably the most picturesque type of cloud is the cumulus. Its cotton-like look along with the soft, white color make it appear like candy in the sky. The individual heaps of cumulus clouds remain strictly separated. The edge of each cloud is fuzzy and may change constantly.

Cumulus clouds are almost exclusively formed by convection. This is why they are a good indicator for gliders and pilots that there are upward winds [10].

**Interpretation:** They indicate fair weather, but can develop into cumulonimbus clouds, if weather conditions allow it.



Foto by Julian Gutbrod

Figure 18: Cumulus clouds [10].

### 2.3.9 Stratocumulus

These low-layer patches of cloud consist mainly of water droplets, absorbing a lot of light, giving them a saturated grey color.

They are the most common clouds on Earth and usually occur over oceans, but also when there is a change in weather or when a layer of stratus cloud breaks up. This means that stratocumulus clouds can also be present near cold, warm or occluded fronts.

Stratocumulus do not produce precipitation themselves, but are formed in many different conditions, including rainy or calm weather.

**Interpretation:** They announce an instability of the atmosphere and are usually present before an occlusion of weather fronts.



Foto by Julian Gutbrod

Figure 19: Stratocumulus clouds [10].

### 2.3.10 Cumulonimbus

Cumulonimbus clouds are massive, high-towering heaps of cloud, spanning over the whole troposphere. Their top is often shaped like an anvil, whereas the base is flat and dark, giving them a menacing look. They are referred to as thunderclouds, because they are the only type of cloud that is able to produce hail, thunder and lightning [15].

Cumulonimbus clouds are formed through natural convection or as a result of forced convection when a cold front pushes up warm air.

**Interpretation:** They cause extreme weather like heavy torrential rain, hail storms, lightning and even tornados.



**Figure 20:** Cumulonimbus clouds [14].

### 3 Implementation Approach

Clouds are comprehensible indicators for telling the weather. They offer many visible features to make an rough prediction of the weather conditions, or weather changes to come. As described in subsection 2.3, some cloud types only form under specific conditions. Also, whenever certain clouds are present, precipitation is shortly followed, as it is with altostratus clouds.

Those factors allow a prediction of the weather, but for this project, the process is reversed. The given data is not an image of clouds, but meteorological measurement data, and the desired outcome is not a prediction, but an image of clouds.



→ rain ahead



→ fair weather ahead



fair weather ahead →



**Figure 21:** Weather information based on visual data.

**Figure 22:** Visual construction based on weather information.

For any given day to render, an implementation would require data from that day but also from the near future of that day. So, in order to render a cloud image for day  $x$ , a potential algorithm could look like this. Note that the listing below describes only an idea and is by no means final or compulsory.

```

1 // weather data including 7-day forecast
2 WeatherData data;
3 CloudRenderer renderer;
4
5 function renderClouds(Day x) {
6     if (x > TODAY + 7) throw;
7
8     d1 = data.getDataFor(x);
9     d2 = data.getDataFor(x + 1);
10    d3 = data.getDataFor(x + 2);
11    // and so on...
12
13    // sophisticated checks about current and future conditions:
14    if (d1.fairWeather && d2.fairWeather)
15        return renderer.clearSky();
16    if (d1.fairWeather && d2.isRaining)
17        return renderer.cloudsOnClearDayBeforeRain();
18    if (d1.isRaining)
19        return renderer.cloudsOnRainyDay();
20    if (d2.isRaining)
21        return renderer.cloudsBeforeRainyDay();
22    if (d3.isRaining)
23        return renderer.clouds2DaysBeforeRainyDay();
24    // and so on...
25
26 }
```

**Listing 1:** Pseudo-code of cloud render algorithm.

### 3.1 Look-Ahead Issue

The approach as described above relies on having data from a couple of days ahead of time. Assumed that number of days is  $t$ , then the weather data for day  $x$  could only be rendered  $t$  days after  $x$ . That would mean, for such an approach to work, the weather of today can not be rendered before  $t$  days later.

In this case however, the weather measurement data retrieved from *meteoblue* also contains a seven-day weather forecast. Given that  $t$  is less than or equal to seven and an implementation still produces accurate cloud imagery, it would no longer be an issue.

### 3.2 Layers of Cloud Shaders

As identified in subsection 2.3, most of the clouds in the troposphere only appear at certain altitudes. The high-level clouds are all of type *cirrus*. The mid-level types are altostratus and altocumulus, while the low-level types are cumulus, stratocumulus and stratus.

This leads to the conclusion that some of the cloud types could be consolidated into a combined layer and rendered by the same shader. Exception to that are only the two larger types that span over multiple height levels: nimbostratus and cumulonimbus. For those, a more unique solution has to be found.



**Figure 23:** Layers of cloud shaders.

### 3.2.1 High-Level Clouds

The uppermost layer would contain cirrus, cirrostratus and cirrocumulus clouds. All of these form under similar weather conditions and closely resemble each other in appearance and formation.

A potential shader for that layer could be programmed to render a base variant of all three cirrus clouds, which would then be parametrized into each individual type of cirrus cloud, whichever is currently visible.



**Figure 24:** Breakdown of the highest shader layer.

### 3.2.2 Mid-Level Clouds

The middle layer consists of altostratus and altocumulus clouds, the latter mainly occurring due to dissipation of the former one. Since they have many shared characteristics, apart from the puffiness, they are predestined to be processed together.

Given a shader is flexible enough to render altostratus clouds, then it is most likely also able to render altocumulus, with only few adjustments necessary.

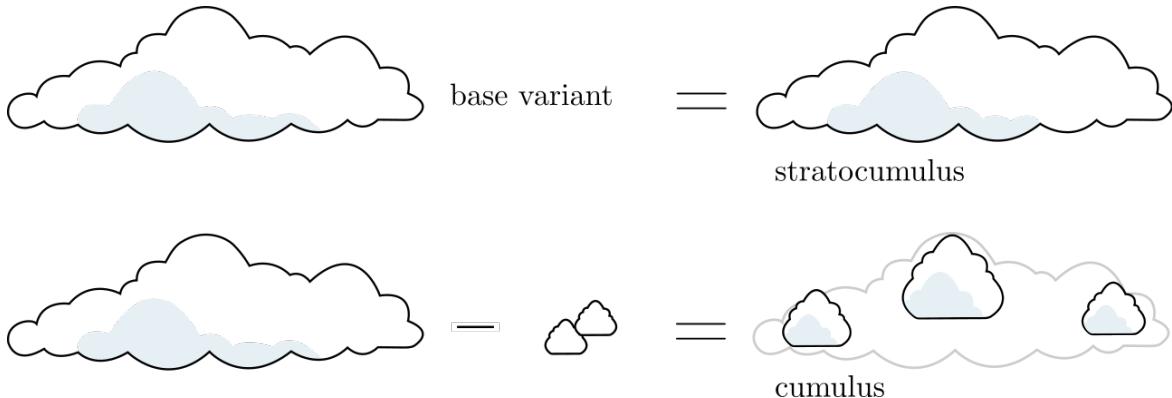


**Figure 25:** Breakdown of the middle shader layer.

### 3.2.3 Low-Level Clouds

The lower layer may prove to be more complex than the others, as the stratus and cumulus clouds do essentially not look alike. However, cumulus clouds could be described as less dense, smaller and separated instances of stratocumulus clouds.

If a shader would be able to render stratocumulus clouds and allow to control the density or the spreading of such, then cumulus clouds could be rendered in the same manner.

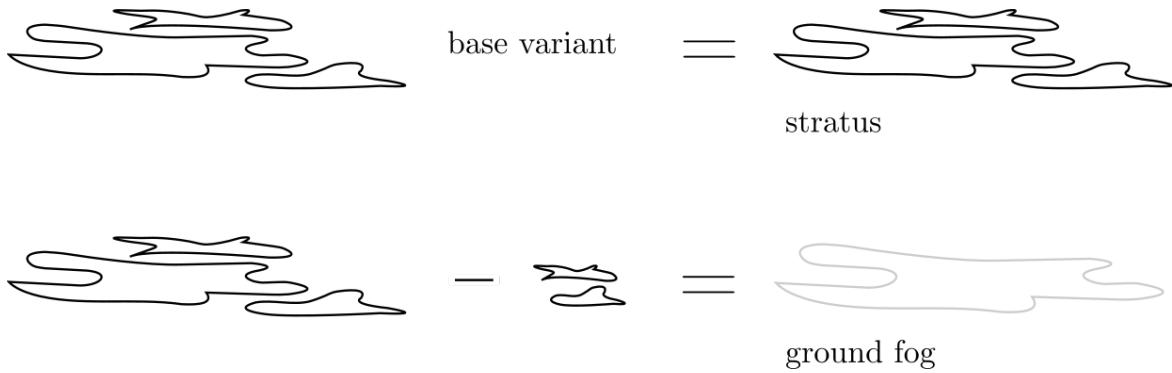


**Figure 26:** Breakdown of the lowest shader layer.

### 3.2.4 Ground Level Fog

The lowest layer consists of fog. It is conceivable that stratus clouds will also be placed in that layer. Both type of clouds are to some extent combinable, as they primarily vary in density.

Therefore, a shader would need to have control over the outcome's density and lightness for it to be able to render both stratus clouds and ground fog.



**Figure 27:** Breakdown of the fog shader layer.

### 3.2.5 Cumulonimbus Layer

With all the previous layers implemented, only the two large cloud types are left, one of them is the cumulonimbus.

Assuming the observer is walking directly underneath a cumulonimbus cloud, the cloud itself and its defining visual features are not really recognizable. It could easily be mistaken for other clouds that produce precipitation.



**Figure 28:** Perspective similarities under clouds with precipitation.

Under that assumption, it is considered that the cumulonimbus cloud will only ever be seen from a distance. This is why these clouds will most likely be rendered in their own layer, farther away from the main camera, but spanning over all other height levels.

### 3.2.6 Nimbostratus Substitute

A similar issue as with the cumulonimbus clouds is present for the nimbostratus clouds. Due to them being thick, dark layers of cloud lacking features and contours, they are more difficult to render.

It is, however, imaginable to omit the type nimbostratus altogether and substitute it by combining and tuning the already existing layers. For example, the nimbostratus cloud might be imitated by darkening the color of altostratus clouds as well making them thicker. With additional stratus clouds and increased fog density, a layman could probably no longer tell the difference.



**Figure 29:** Breakdown of the nimbostratus substitute.

### 3.3 Exclusiveness Issue

All shader layers described in subsection 3.2, except the cumulonimbus layer, come with an issue. Given that multiple cloud types are consolidated into one layer, and that layer can only render one cloud type at a time, then no two cloud types of the same layer can ever be rendered together.

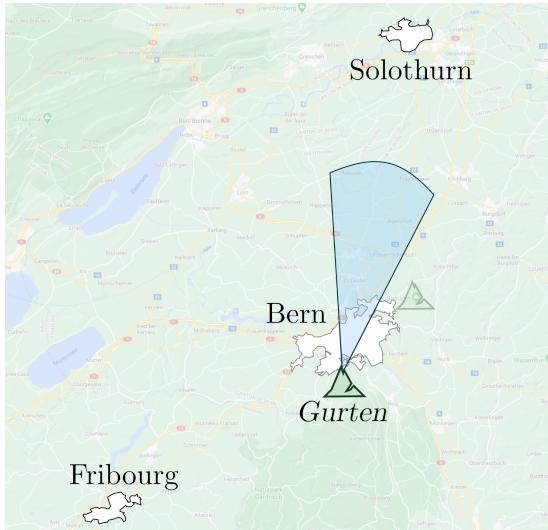
However, the chance for multiple clouds of the same layer to coexist is considered to be negligible, which is why the issue is disregarded in this project.

### 3.4 Background Weather Consideration

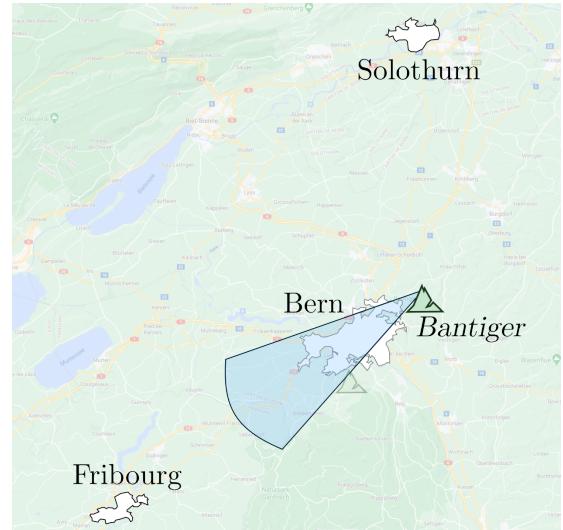
Clouds can be seen from great distances, especially when the observer is located on elevated terrain, which is the case in this project. For this reason, clouds in close proximity to the observer do not have to be alike more distant ones. This is also true for weather conditions. Because of this, whenever rendering cloudscapes from an angle where the horizon is also visible, the weather measurements from places in the far distance also have to be taken into account.

As mentioned in the bachelor project specification document, there are two points of view from which the weather will be rendered. They are two mountains near the city of Bern: the *Bantiger* and the *Gurten* mountain.

From both peaks, Bern lies in the center of the view. However, a city in the background of each perspective has been chosen to account for weather in the distance.



**Figure 30:** Perspective view from the Gurten mountain: distant weather in Solothurn is considered.



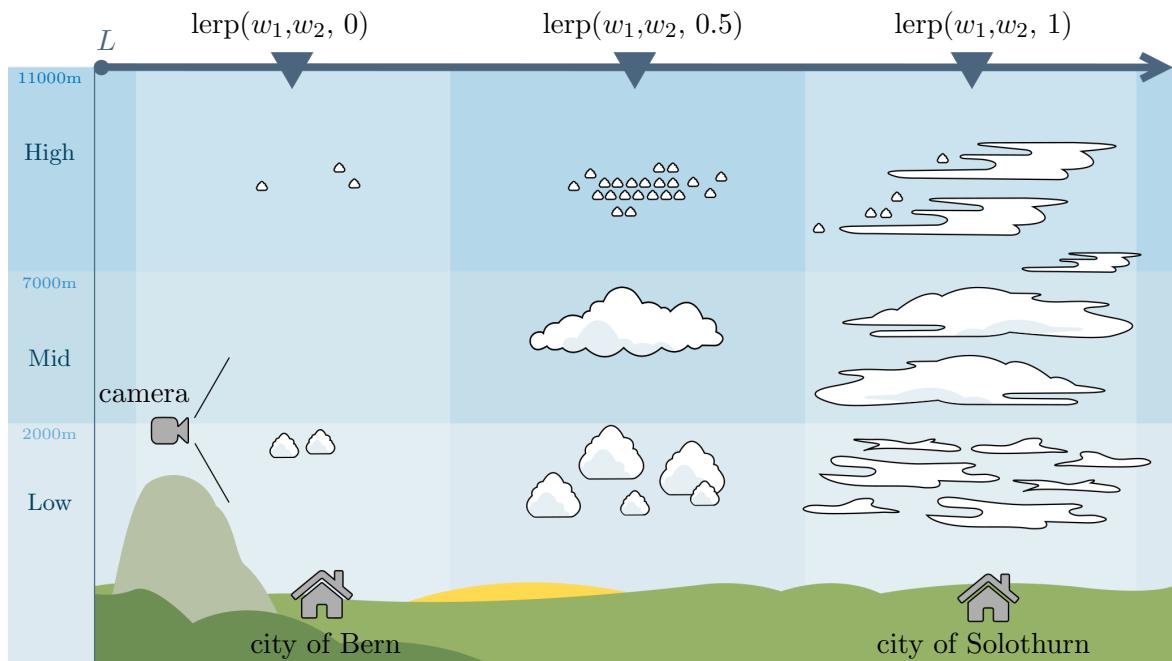
**Figure 31:** Perspective view from the Bantiger mountain: distant weather in Fribourg is considered.

### 3.5 Weather Data Interpolation

Following up on the background weather consideration, all shader layers also need to know those distances and adjust accordingly. Given there are two measurement sets, one for each city, then the weather inbetween can be a combination of both sets. A very common method to achieve such an evaluation of interim data is called *linear interpolation*. Linear interpolation can be defined as a function  $lerp$ , if  $0 \geq t \geq 1$ :

$$lerp(a, b, t) = a + (b - a) * t$$

Assuming that the two weather measurement sets  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  can be interpolated, then the function  $lerp$  can be used. In the following example,  $w_1$  represents fair weather in Bern, whereas  $w_2$  represents cloudy and gloomy weather in Solothurn. With increasing distance along the axis  $L$ , factor  $t$  gradually rises from 0 to 1.



**Figure 32:** Weather data interpolation for the cloud layers from Bern to Solothurn.

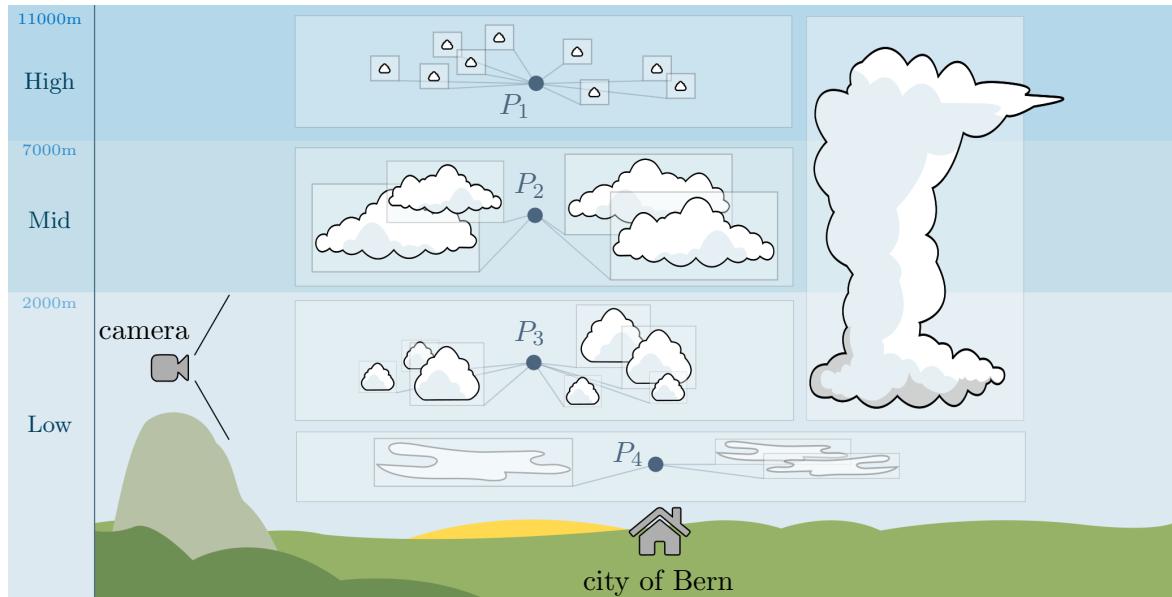
In summary, at Bern ( $t = 0$ ), weather for data set  $w_1$  is displayed, while at Solothurn ( $t = 1$ ), weather for the data set  $w_2$  is rendered. Everything inbetween is a mixture of both data sets, relative to which ever is closer.

### 3.6 Alternative Approach

Every subsection that describes another feature of the implementation approach increases the complexity of the developing concept, which is already depending on many ideas and structures to work. In cases like this it is best to prepare an alternative approach to implementation, that can be pursued should the primary one fail.

The core concept of this second implementation approach is based on particle systems. It still relies on having four major layers with an additional cumulonimbus block. The nimbostratus will also be substituted. Those layers are almost identical to the layers described in subsubsection 3.2.1 to subsubsection 3.2.5.

However, instead of the layers each being a single shader, they are replaced with a particle system that emits cubes of clouds. Those cubes are rendered by different shaders, depending on which layer they are spawned in. The highest layer,  $P_1$ , would emit cloud cubes of the cirrus family. The middle layer,  $P_2$ , is responsible to render alto cloud cubes. Layer  $P_3$  would spawn low-level cloud cubes, while the lowest layer,  $P_4$ , would create fog particles.



**Figure 33:** Alternative implementation approach based on particle systems.

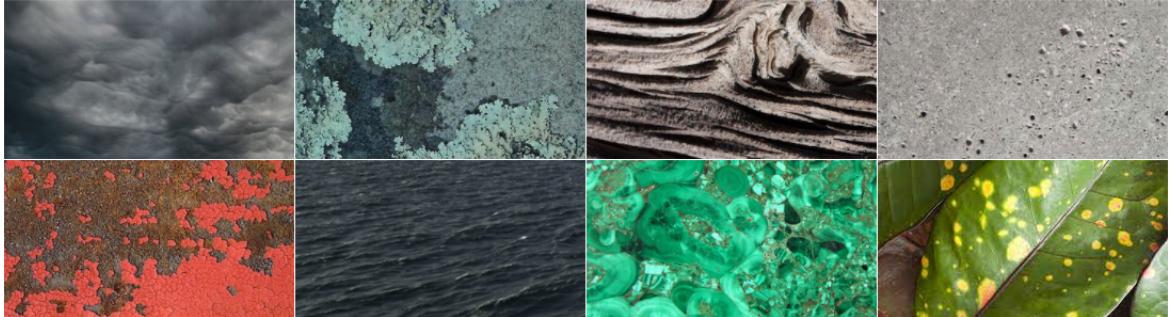
This alternative approach would offer a much higher flexibility in controlling exactly how many clouds are present. Each layer is in absolute control of when it spawns cloud particles, how fast the spawn rate is, the particle's size and many more characteristics.

Nonetheless, contrary to the first approach, a linear interpolation of the clouds will prove to be more difficult in this case. A particle system cannot be interpolated along two positions, as it is bound to a fixed location. This issue could be disregarded at the cost of realism, by only using three particle systems: one for Bern, one inbetween both cities, using interpolated weather data, and one for the distant city.

Additionally, the number of cloud cubes may heavily impact performance. If the system is required to limit the number of cloud cubes, its realism would suffer further.

## 4 Noise Generation

Nature's chaotic and fortuitous behavior creates a world full of diversity and unpredictability. This can be observed in a surprisingly high amount of objects, structures and phenomenons. For example, the following images show photographs of patterns that seem almost completely random.



**Figure 34:** Random patterns observed in Nature [16].

In computer science, the virtual recreation of such randomness has been studied continuously over the last decades. The outcome of a randomness generator is called *noise*. There are many established algorithms to create random patterns, one of which generates the famous *Voronoi* noise.

### 4.1 Previous Work

Many of the following subsections rely on concepts and algorithms that have been thoroughly explained in the project's previous work [17]. This include sine-based deterministic number generation algorithms, also known as also *pseudo-random* number generation [18]. It further includes different noise generation algorithms like Perlin noise [19] and functions like the fractal Brownian motion [20].

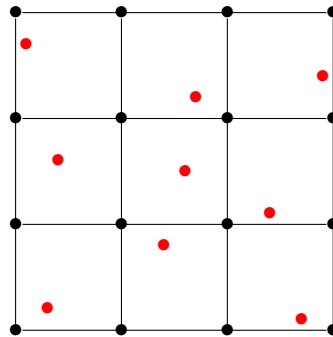
Those algorithms will not be described again, as they have already been studied and documented before.

## 4.2 Voronoi Noise Algorithm

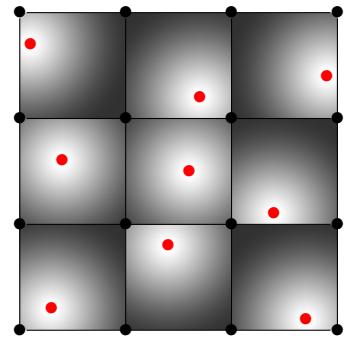
One of the more commonly used procedural pattern generation algorithms is that of Steven Worley, developed in 1996 [21], called *Worley's algorithm*. The algorithm is also known as the *Voronoi* algorithm due to its similar appearance to a Voronoi diagram. In that diagram, points, called *seeds*, are randomly scattered inside a defined space. After that, regions are created, consisting of all points closer to that seed than to any other.

The Voronoi noise algorithm creates a cellular pattern and is therefore well suited for simulating natural distribution of cloud heaps, as they are in some way also arranged in cells.

The noise algorithm starts by dividing the space into a grid, for which each cell is assigned a random point. From there, each pixel gets shaded by how far it is to the seed in its cell.



**Figure 35:** Voronoi grid with pseudo-randomly assigned seed points for each cell.



**Figure 36:** Voronoi grid with seed distances visualized.

As recognizable in Figure 36, hard contours are still visible along the grid lines. This can be improved by including the adjacent cells when finding the closest seed for any given fragment. This amounts to  $3^n - 1$  neighboring cells, where  $n$  is the number of dimensions. This means for 2D space its eight cells, while in 3D its 26.



**Figure 37:** Complete 2D Voronoi noise texture.

An implementation in high-level shading language (HLSL) of this relatively simple algorithm could look like the following listing.

```

1 float2 randomSeed(float2 co) {
2     return float2(
3         fract(sin(dot(co, float2(12.9898, 78.233))) * 43758.5453123),
4         fract(sin(dot(co, float2(39.3461, 11.135))) * 14375.8545359));
5 }
6
7 float voronoi(float2 p) {
8     float2 baseCell = floor(p);
9     float dMin = 999;
10
11    for(int x = -1; x <= 1; x++) {
12        for(int y = -1; y <= 1; y++) {
13            float2 cell = baseCell + float2(x, y);
14            float2 seed = cell + randomSeed(cell);
15            float d = distance(seed, p);
16            if (d < dMin) {
17                dMin = d;
18            }
19        }
20    }
21    return dMin;
22 }
```

**Listing 2:** Implementation of 2D Voronoi noise algorithm.

The 3D equivalent of the algorithm looks fairly similar.

```

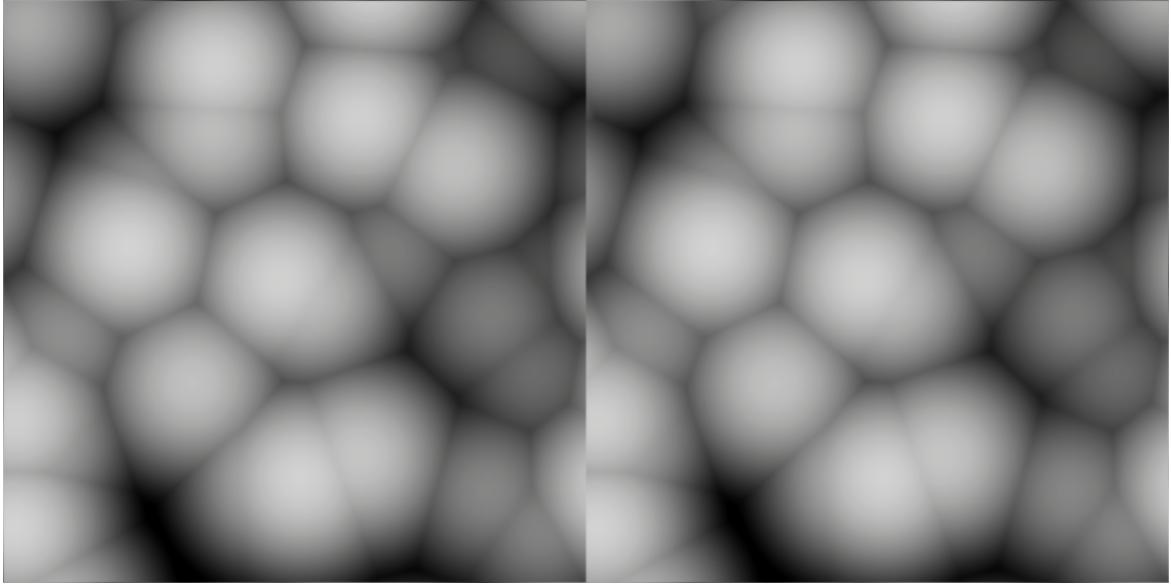
1 float3 randomSeed(float3 co) {
2     return float3(
3         fract(sin(dot(co, float3(12.989, 78.233, 37.719))) * 43758.5453123),
4         fract(sin(dot(co, float3(39.346, 11.135, 83.155))) * 14375.8545346),
5         fract(sin(dot(co, float3(73.156, 52.235, 09.151))) * 31396.2234116));
6 }
7
8 float voronoi(float3 p) {
9     float3 baseCell = floor(p);
10    float dMin = 999;
11
12    for(int x = -1; x <= 1; x++) {
13        for(int y = -1; y <= 1; y++) {
14            for(int z = -1; z <= 1; z++) {
15                float3 cell = baseCell + float3(x, y, z);
16                float3 seed = cell + randomSeed(cell);
17                float d = distance(seed, p);
18                if (d < dMin) {
19                    dMin = d;
20                }
21            }
22        }
23    }
24    return dMin;
25 }
```

**Listing 3:** Implementation of 3D Voronoi noise algorithm.

### 4.3 Seamless Noise

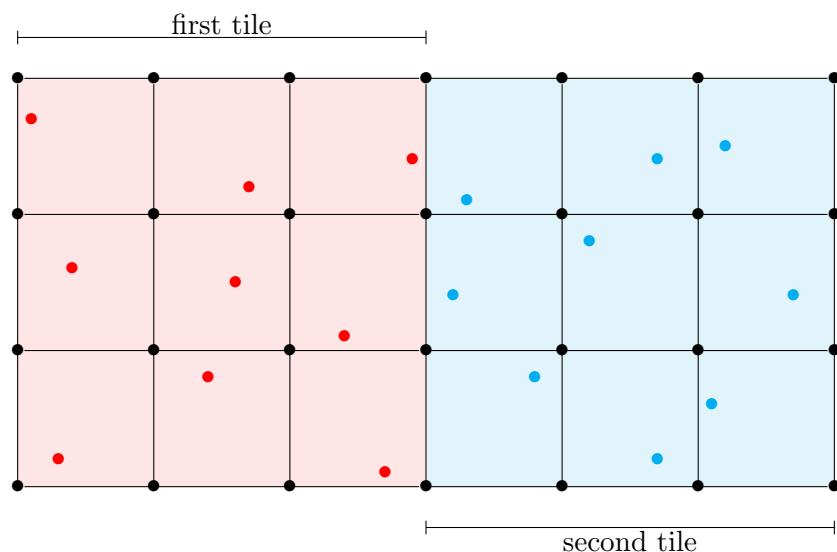
In Figure 37, the generated cells appear to be randomly distributed, but there is still a major flaw in the texture.

As already mentioned previously, the noise generation is confined to a fixed region. This poses an issue when the desired area is larger than the defined space of the algorithm. It is therefore not possible to tile the same texture without visible seams inbetween the tiles. Tiling the texture saves the calculation of an overly large area of noise and is therefore the desired approach in many cases.



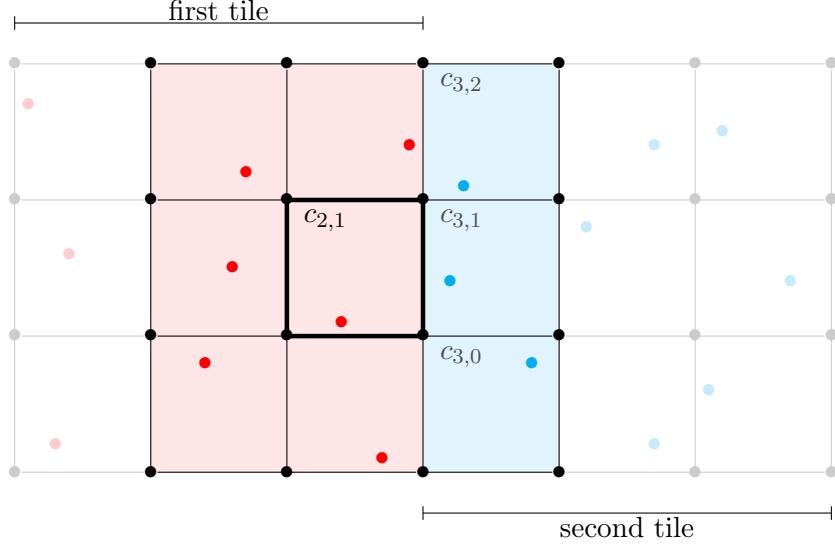
**Figure 38:** Tiled 3D noise texture slices.

The problem occurs when checking the neighboring cells of the current cell. For example, here are the seeds for two adjacent tiles of the same noise texture.



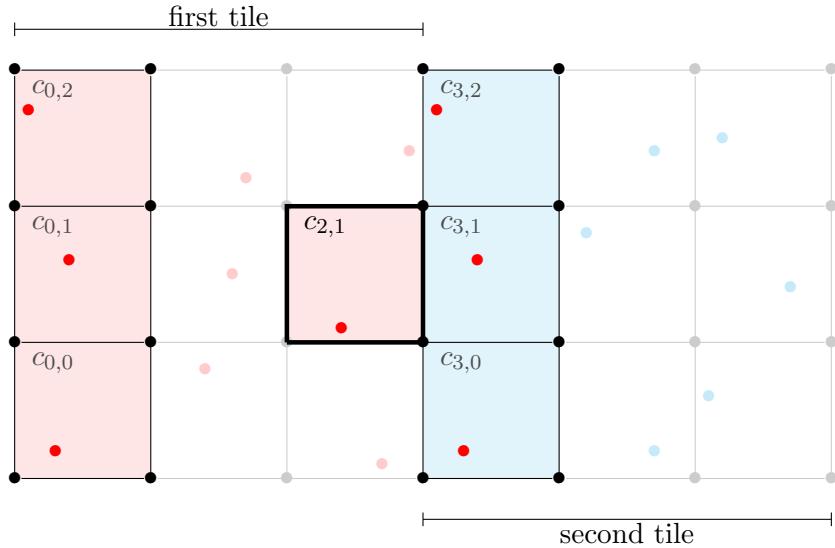
**Figure 39:** Voronoi noise seeds of the second tile are different than the seeds of the first tile.

When inspecting the cell  $c_{2,1}$  of the first tile, some of its neighbors, namely  $c_{3,0}$  to  $c_{3,2}$ , are part of the next tile. However, since the desired outcome is a repeating texture, the underlaying texture will be the same as the first one.



**Figure 40:** Voronoi noise seeds are sampled from the second tile.

Naturally, when using seeds from the second tile but placing the texture from the first tile underneath, a disruption in the pattern will be visible in the form of a seam. This is why, when the sampling point exceeds the defined space of the texture, the seeds will always be calculated based on the first tile again. Instead of sampling  $c_{3,0}$  to  $c_{3,2}$  from the second tile,  $c_{0,0}$  to  $c_{0,2}$  will be used.



**Figure 41:** Voronoi noise seeds that exceed the boundary are sampled from the first set again.

In conclusion, the same set of points that is calculated for the first texture tile needs to be used again for every succeeding tile.

Mathematically, this is solved by using the *modulo* operation. The dividend is the current cell and the divisor is the period, or how often the noise texture is repeated.

```

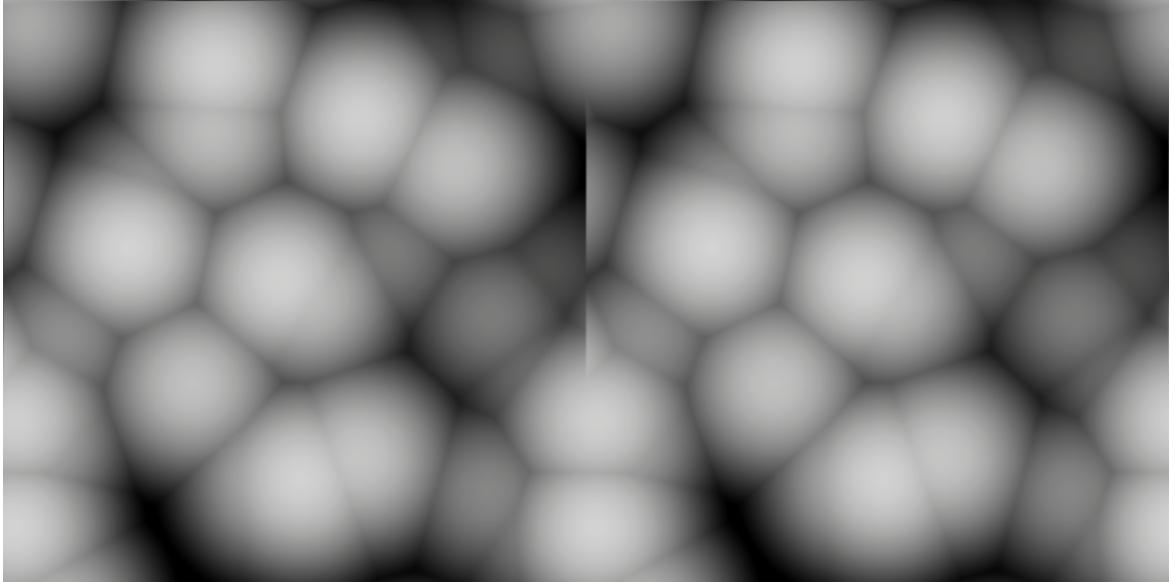
1 float voronoi(float3 p, float3 period) {
2     float3 baseCell = floor(p);
3     float dMin = 999;
4
5     for(int x = -1; x <= 1; x++) {
6         for(int y = -1; y <= 1; y++) {
7             for(int z = -1; z <= 1; z++) {
8                 float3 cell = baseCell + float3(x, y, z);
9                 float3 tiledCell = cell % period;
10                float seed = cell + randomSeed(tiledCell);
11                float d = distance(seed, p);
12                if (d < dMin) {
13                    dMin = d;
14                }
15            }
16        }
17    }
18    return dMin;
19 }
```

**Listing 4:** Implementation of a partially seamless 3D Voronoi noise algorithm.

Interestingly, this does only partially solve the problem. As it turns out, the modulo operation available in HLSL treats negative values differently than expected. Instead of returning the absolute modulo value, it returns the remainder, including negative values.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{expected : } -5 \bmod 3 &= 1 \\ \text{actual : } -5 \bmod 3 &= -2 \end{aligned}$$

When used this way, the outcome still has visible seams where the modulo operations have to deal with negative numbers. The issue is further explained by Ronja [22].



**Figure 42:** Partially seamless, tiled 3D noise texture slices.

The problem is easily fixed, though. To get a positive dividend, one can simply take the remainder of the dividend, add the divisor and then take the remainder again, knowing that the number will now be positive beforehand.

$$\text{mod}(x, y) = (x \% y + y) \% y$$

Alternatively, the implementation as described in the OpenGL documentation [23] can be used. It is capable of dealing with negative values, and is defined as follows:

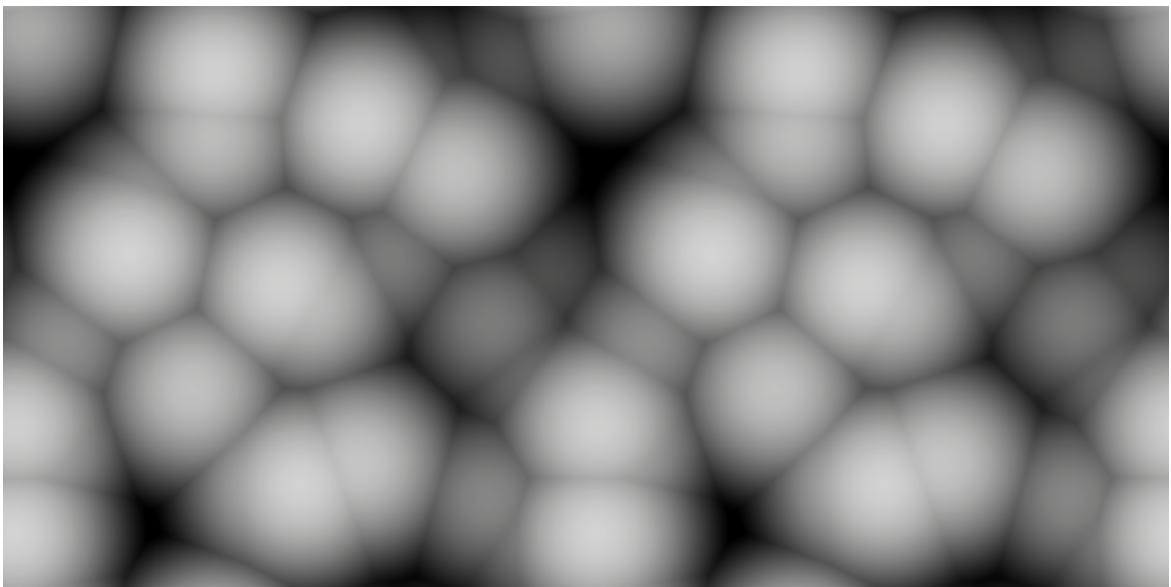
$$\text{mod}(x, y) = x - y * \text{floor}(x/y)$$

```

1 #define mod(x,y) (x-y*floor(x/y))
2
3 float voronoi(float3 p, float3 period) {
4     float3 baseCell = floor(p);
5     float dMin = 999;
6
7     for(int x = -1; x <= 1; x++) {
8         for(int y = -1; y <= 1; y++) {
9             for(int z = -1; z <= 1; z++) {
10                 float3 cell = baseCell + float3(x, y, z);
11                 float3 tiledCell = mod(cell, period);
12                 float seed = cell + randomSeed(tiledCell);
13                 float d = distance(seed, p);
14                 if (d < dMin) {
15                     dMin = d;
16                 }
17             }
18         }
19     }
20     return dMin;
21 }
```

**Listing 5:** Implementation of seamless 3D Voronoi noise algorithm.

And with that, the noise texture tiles seamlessly.



**Figure 43:** Seamlessly tiled 3D noise texture slices.

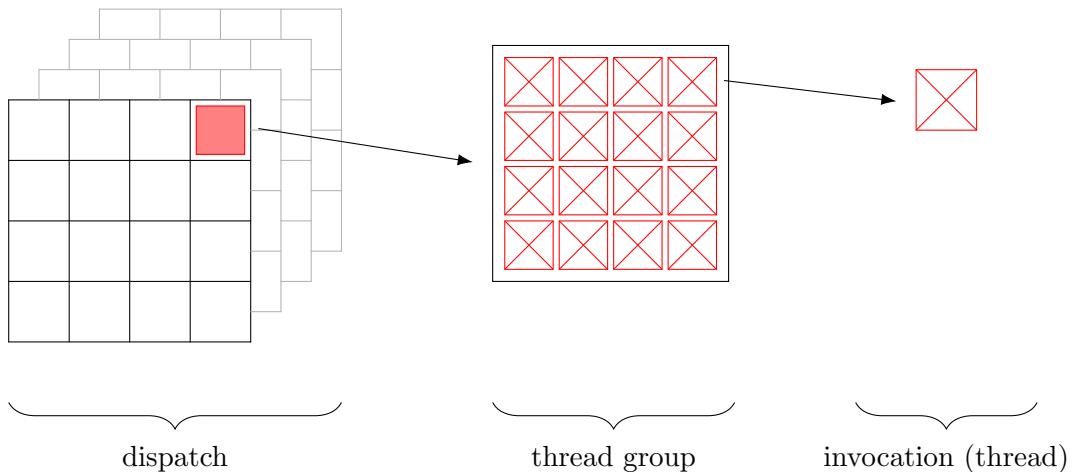
## 4.4 Compute Shaders

Compute shaders are special programs that run on a graphics card. They are used for high-speed general-purpose computing. Unlike regular shaders, they do not write directly to the frame buffer and require no setup of vertices. It is more common that the target buffer is a 2D or 3D texture.

Compute shaders also skip the render output pipeline (ROP), which is responsible for a process called rasterization, in which the final image is created. This process is usually computationally demanding and by skipping it, a great deal of performance can be saved.

### 4.4.1 Compute Shader Structure

The following figure shows that the compute shader is dispatched in a large group of thread groups, each containing a number of threads, which represent a single invocation of the shader.



**Figure 44:** Hierarchical thread structure of compute shaders.

In Unity, compute shaders are written in HLSL and interact with Microsoft's DirectCompute technology, a graphics card interface for compute shaders. This is a standard example of such a shader:

```
1 #pragma kernel CSMain
2
3 RWTexture3D<float4> _Result;
4
5 [numthreads(4,4,4)]
6 void CSMain (uint3 id : SV_DispatchThreadID)
7 {
8     _Result[id.xyz] = float4(1,0,0,1);
9 }
```

**Listing 6:** A standard compute shader template.

The so-called *kernel* is defined on the first line and describes the method that will be executed when the compute shader is dispatched. In this example, there is only one kernel with the name `CSMain`. When executed, it writes to a 3D texture and sets the color of a specific 3D texture element, short *texel*, to red.

On the third line, a 3D texture variable is declared. It does not have to be initialized.

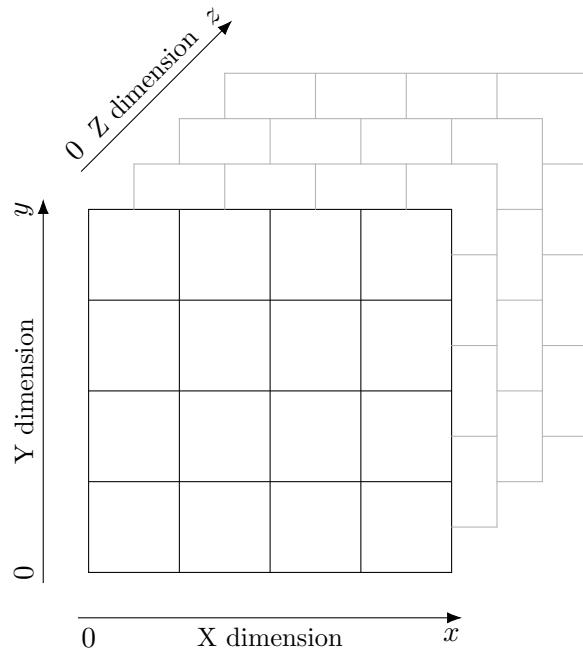
The type is `RWTexture3D`, which means the texture is enabled for both reading and writing. Another important part is the `[numthreads(4,4,4)]` statement. It specifies the dimensions of thread groups.

#### 4.4.2 Thread Groups

When running a compute shader, the kernel is executed on many threads in parallel. This allows the GPU to split up the computation instructions declared in the shader. For each part, a thread group is created, which only handles that specific part. These thread groups run individually and simultaneously, speeding up the process massively.

The dimensions of a thread group can be controlled with the `numthreads` attribute. In the example above, for each thread group, there will be 4 threads in the X dimension, 4 threads in the Y dimension and 4 threads in the Z dimension.

Every kernel has a parameter called `id`. This is the identifier of the current thread, short *thread ID* or *dispatch thread ID*. The thread ID is unique over all thread groups. The following example shows how a thread group is structured.



**Figure 45:** Compute shader thread group with labeled dimensions.

Each cell represents a single thread that is run when the thread group is executed. The identifier of a thread is equal to its coordinates in this system, with the thread group identifier added as an offset.

#### 4.4.3 Dispatching a Compute Shader

When dispatching a compute shader, the number of thread groups for each dimension has to be passed along. To fill a 3D texture with a resolution of 256x256x256 pixels, a compute shader with thread groups the size of 4x4x4 threads needs to be dispatched with  $256/4 = 64$  thread groups in each dimension.

Each thread group will be assigned its own identifier, the *thread group ID*.

#### 4.4.4 Thread and Thread Group Identifiers

The thread group ID, or simply group ID, is calculated by taking the current index of the thread group in each dimension. When dispatching a kernel with 64 groups in each dimension, it means that the group identifiers range from (0,0,0) to (63,63,63).

In each thread group, the thread ID is then calculated as follows. Given  $id_{group}$  is the thread group ID,  $n_{threads}$  is the number of threads specified in the kernel, and  $t_{coord}$  are the coordinates of the thread inside the thread group, then:

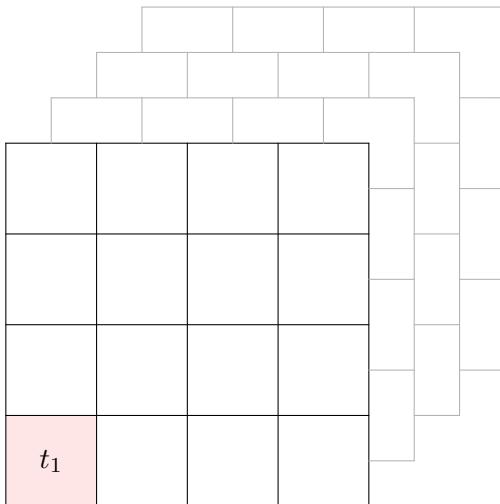
$$id_{thread} = id_{group} * n_{threads} + t_{coord}$$

Here are two practical examples.

$$\begin{aligned} id_1 &= (0, 0, 0) * (4, 4, 4) + (0, 0, 0) = (0, 0, 0) \\ id_2 &= (1, 63, 2) * (4, 4, 4) + (3, 3, 1) = (7, 255, 9) \end{aligned}$$

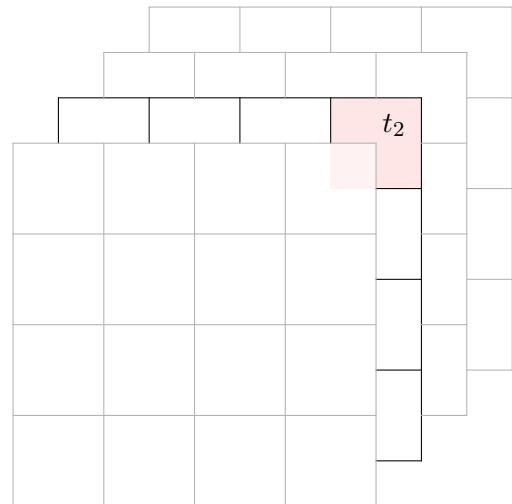
The following figures each show a single thread group, with a specific thread marked in red. The group ID is denoted in the top left corner, together with the coordinates of the thread inside the thread group.

thread group ID: (0,0,0)  
thread coordinates: (0,0,0)



**Figure 46:** Compute shader thread group with dimensions 4x4x4. Marked in red is thread  $t_1$  with  $id_1 = (0, 0, 0)$ .

thread group ID: (1,63,2)  
thread coordinates: (3,3,1)



**Figure 47:** Compute shader thread group with dimensions 4x4x4. Marked in red is thread  $t_2$  with  $id_2 = (7, 255, 9)$ .

#### 4.4.5 Making Use of All Channels

Once it is clear how the dispatch thread ID is calculated, a compute shader can be implemented. The following example shows a kernel that computes a 3D Voronoi noise texture with the use of fractal Brownian motion, here called `fbm`. Each channel of the texture is assigned a noise value that was calculated with a different scale and a different amount of octaves.

```

1 [numthreads(8,8,8)]
2 void CSNoise (uint3 id : SV_DispatchThreadID)
3 {
4     float3 threadCoord = float3(id.x, id.y, id.z) / 256;
5     float3 noiseCoord = threadCoord * _NoiseScale;
6
7     float r = fbm(noiseCoord * 1, 1);
8     float g = fbm(noiseCoord * 2, 4);
9     float b = fbm(noiseCoord * 5, 8);
10    float a = 1;
11
12    _Result[id.xyz] = float4(r, g, b, a);
13 }
```

**Listing 7:** An implementation of a 3D noise compute shader.

With each channel holding a different level of detail, all shaders that read from this texture can fetch multiple noise values with a single texture lookup. Listing 8 shows an excerpt of a standard fragment shader that reads from a 3D noise texture as described above.

```

1 float3 sampleDensity(float3 p) {
2     return tex3D(_NoiseTexture3D, p).xyz;
3 }
4
5 fixed4 frag(v2f i) : SV_Target
6 {
7     fixed4 color = 0;
8
9     float3 samplePos = i.worldPos * _NoiseScale;
10    float3 noise = sampleDensity(samplePos);
11
12    float detail0 = noise.x;
13    float detail1 = noise.y;
14    float detail2 = noise.z;
15
16    // making use of the different detail levels...
17
18    return color;
19 }
```

**Listing 8:** An implementation of a shader making use of a 3D noise texture.

## **5 Technical Implementation**

### **5.1 Meteoblue Integration**

### **5.2 ArcGIS Integration**

### **5.3 Shader Architecture**

### **5.4 Results**

### **5.5 Testing**

### **5.6 Measurability**

### **5.7 Comparison to Previous Work**

2. technical impl: algorithms, progress pics, 2. results: what has been achieved, how realistic, compare to spec 2. testing: 1-2 paragraphs, visual testing, gui stuff, messbarkeit,

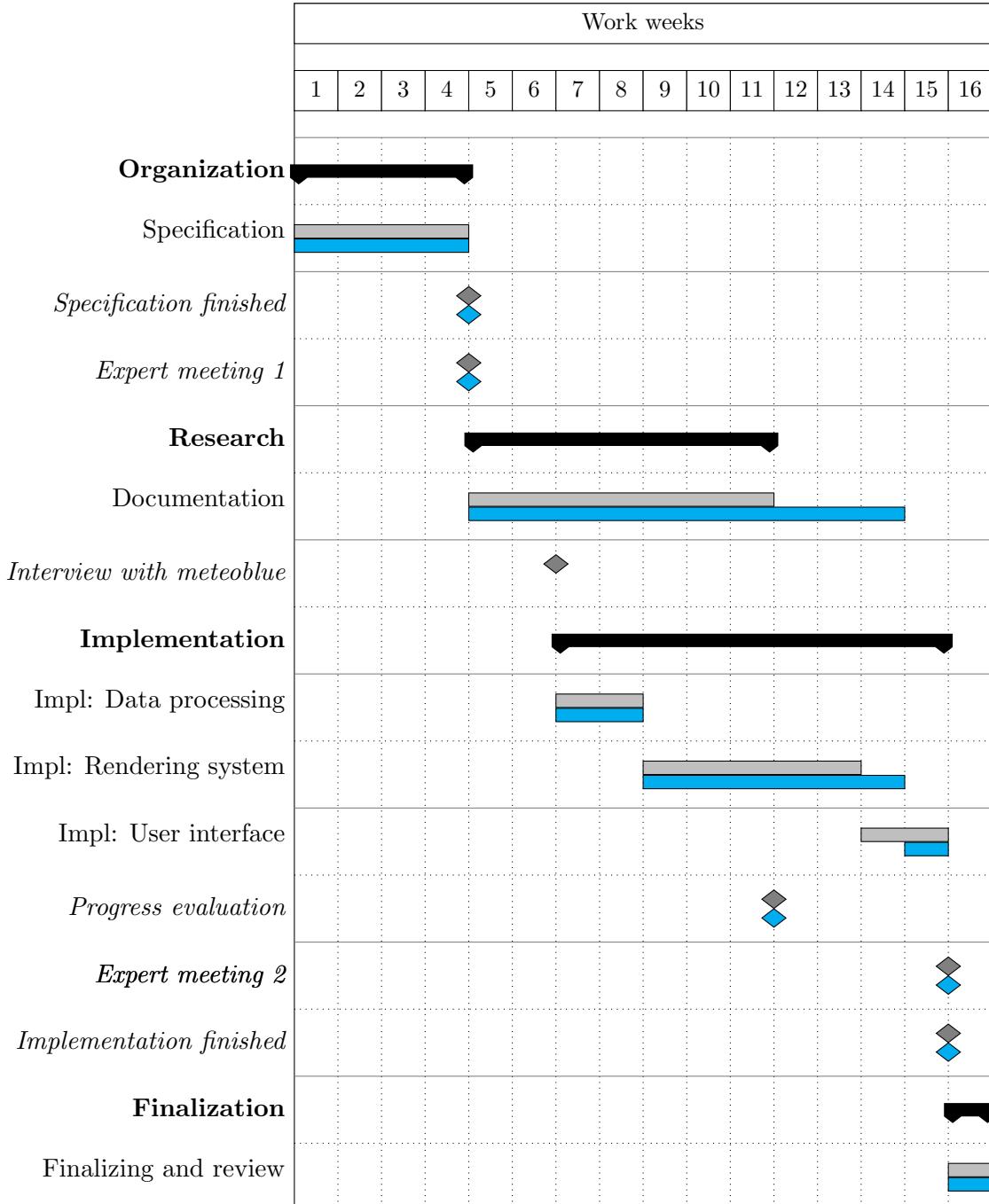
## 6 Conclusion and Critical Discussion

Viewed from a critical perspective, two out of three prototypes have been developed during the project, of which one was dropped because it was too similar to another. Additionally, a complete cloud shader has been programmed, which was not originally planned. However, it combined all research into one practical example of how to create such a cloud shader. Compared to state-of-the-art cloud shaders, the one made during this project can keep up in terms of appearance and customization options, but lacks good performance and the ability to render different cloud types. In section 4, sphere tracing is extensively described and explained in detail, but was not used in the final prototype, as there is no defined SDF for a cloud volume. The same applies for all shadow related algorithms. The shader does not use shadow rays nor include ambient occlusion.<sup>44</sup>

## 7 Project Management

### 7.1 Schedule Comparison

The following chart shows the original schedule (in grey) with a side-by-side comparison with the actual time spent for each task (in blue). It indicates that the schedule was mostly met throughout the project.



The only major discrepancy between the planned and the actual schedule is the interview with *meteoblue*, which was turned down by *meteoblue*. The interview would overstep the

limited license that was arranged for this project. This was unfortunate, but left more time for the documentation, which turned out to require more time and effort.

## 7.2 Fulfillment of Requirements

The following table shows the original requirements and whether or not they were met during the project.

Number	Name	Is met?
R.1	Understanding the basic nature of clouds	Yes
R.2	Understanding of different characteristics of clouds	Yes
R.3	Understanding of compute shaders	Yes
D.1	Periodical acquirement of real-time weather data from <i>meteoblue</i>	Yes
D.2	Periodical acquirement of photographs of 360-degree cameras	Yes
D.3	Acquirement of elevation model data from <i>swisstopo</i>	No
D.4	Noise generation based on compute shaders	Yes
D.5.1	Implementation of data aggregation and processing	Yes
D.5.2	Implementation of core rendering system	Yes
D.5.3	Implementation of user interface	Yes
O.1	Rendering performance optimization	Partially

Both requirements D.3 and O.1 are not or only partially met.

### 7.2.1 Elevation Model Replacement

Originally, it was planned to retrieve elevation model data from *swisstopo*. This turned out to be more problematic than anticipated, having multiple file formats that are incompatible with Unity Engine. This would have required a middleware to convert the files to a suitable format, which was also difficult to find. Additionally, the elevation model data was split into tiles, which would have needed to be stitched together in-engine.

Luckily, during research, a Unity Engine plugin for *ArcGIS* services developed by *ESRI* was found. This allowed for a quick setup without further mapping and tiling of geodata or aerial images.

Since the generated 3D models from the plugin were more than a suitable replacement for the *swisstopo* data, the requirement D.3 was annulled, as there was now another, easier way to get 3D elevation data. From then on, only the *ArcGIS* plugin was used.

### 7.2.2 Rendering Performance Optimization

There have been several attempts at optimizing the rendering performance. This includes the reduction of ray marching and light marching steps, the careful choice of scale and amount of octaves for 3D noise generation as well as the avoidance of using heavy operations like `pow()`, `exp()`, `log()`. However, there was not sufficient time to delve deeper into performance optimization, but since the software is able to run with a decent frame rate, the issue was no longer pursued.

## **7.3 Future Work**

### **7.3.1 Rendering Capabilities**

Despite the considerable effort already put into lighting and illumination methods, there are still some features missing. One of those are god rays, the volumetric light shafts that shine through gaps in clouds, giving the scene even more depth. Other absent features are the sun's and moon's halo: A bright circle around the celestial body.

### **7.3.2 Live Data Feed**

The resulting weather rendering system is still dependent on locally accumulated meteo data. A potential follow-up project could be an implementation of a live data feed system that continuously updated the weather rendering system.

### **7.3.3 Simulation Game**

Alternatively, the project could be turned into a simulator game, similar to how Microsoft's Flight Simulator works.

### **7.3.4 Meteorological Events**

There is also the option to include meteorological events like thunderstorms, blizzards, rainbows and many more natural phenomena.

## **7.4 Project Conclusion**

It is noteworthy that three more weeks were put into research. This is mainly because new methods and algorithms have been continuously researched during prototyping, which resulted in constant documentation of those findings. However, this did not conflict with the remainder of the schedule.

Still, the total amount of time spent was about ten percent more than the originally estimated time budget of 320 hours. This is probably due to the fact that there was quite some effort put into the final implementation.

The project occurred during the same time as the global coronavirus lockdown restrictions, but was unhindered by that.

In summary, all project requirements were met, almost all milestones were completed in time and the final implementation turned out great, making this a successful and very informative project.

## Glossary

**Altitude** A vertical distance measurement, in this context specifically the distance from sea level to the given object. 2, 5, 6, 11

**Cloudlet** Small, white, puffy clouds that come in large quantities, together forming a cloud of the cumulus family. 6, 7

**Cold front** A cold weather front, the boundary of a mass of air that carries cold or cool air. When colliding with a warm front, precipitation is often followed. 3, 4, 9, 37, 40

**Compute shader** A shader which runs on the GPU but outside of the default render pipeline. 26, 27, 29, 35, 42

**Convection** The process of warm air rising from the surface and cooling at higher altitude, of which the moisture is then condensed into clouds. 2, 7, 8, 9

**Desublimation** The process of gas transitioning to liquid without passing through the liquid phase. 6

**Fractal Brownian motion** Different iterations of continuously more detailed noise layered on top of each other. i, 19, 29

**Fragment** In computer graphics, a fragment is a single pixel on the screen that is processed by a fragment shader and given a color in the process, effectively rendering it. 35

**Fragment shader** A shader that processes single pixels, called fragments, calculates its color and outputs that to the frame buffer. 29, 35

**Frame rate** The rate at which a new image (called frame) appears on the display. 33

**Frame buffer** The buffer that stores pixels for each frame, from which the monitor constantly reads. The monitor then displays those pixels on the screen. 26, 35

**GPU** Graphics processing unit. A piece of hardware designed to rapidly manipulate and alter memory, often intended for output to a display device. 27, 36

**Halo phenomenon** White or colored rings or arcs of light around the sun or the moon, produced by cirrostratus clouds. 6

**HLSL** High-level shading language. Developed by microsoft, this is a standard shader language for DirectX used in graphics programming. 21, 24, 26

**Kernel** In compute shaders, the kernel represents an entry point and defines the method that is executed for each thread group when running the compute shader. 26, 27, 28, 29

**Light marching** The same concept as ray marching, but instead of being cast into the volume, it is cast towards the primary light source with a constant step. 33

**Linear interpolation** Simply put, linear interpolation describes a method of finding values inbetween two points on the same line. 17, 18

**Noise** A randomly generated pattern, referring to procedural pattern generation. i, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 40, 41, 42

**Noise generation** Noise generation is used to generate textures of one or more dimension with seemingly random smooth transitions from black to white (zero to one). 19, 22, 33

**Occluded front** When a cold front overtakes a warm front, it pushes the warm air upwards (thermals). The moisture of the warm air condenses as it rises, creating water vapor. This often results in clouds with precipitation. 4, 7, 8, 36, 40

**Occlusion** In meteorology, the clash of a warm front and a cold front. See occluded front. 4, 40

**Particle system** In computer graphics, a particle system is a technique that continuously spawns and recycles objects. They are often used to reproduce fire or smoke effects, with small flame or dust textures as particles. 18, 40

**Precipitation** Rainfall. The result of atmospheric water vapor that has been condensed and now falls from clouds. 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 35, 36, 37, 40

**Procedural** Created solely with algorithms and independant of any prerequisites. i, 36

**Pseudo-random** A random number generated with a deterministic algorithm, meaning that the same input will always give the same output. 19, 20, 40

**Rasterization** Rasterization describes the final step in rendering. It is the task of taking an image described in vector geometry and converting it into a raster image (a series of pixels). 26

**Ray marching** Ray marching is a type of method to approximate the surface distance of a volumetric object, where a ray is cast into the volume and stepped forward until the surface is reached. i, 33, 35

**ROP** A component responsible for calculating the final pixel colors or depth values via specific matrix and vector operations. 26

**Shader** A piece of software which runs on the GPU, rendering geometrically defined objects to the screen. 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 26, 27, 29, 35

**Surface normal** A *surface normal* or *normal* is a vector which is perpendicular to a given geometry, like a triangle or polygon. i

**Texel** Short for texture element, a single pixel of a 2D texture. 26

**Texture slice** A 2D texture extracted from a 3D texture for a given depth. 22, 24, 25, 40, 41

**Thermal** In relation with meteorology, the hot, rising air from convection is called "thermal". 2, 3, 4, 36, 40

**Volumetric** This describes a technique which takes a 3D volume of data and projects it to 2D. It is mostly used for transparent effects stored as a 3D image. i

**Warm front** A warm weather front, the boundary of a mass of air that carries mild or warm air. When colliding with a cold front, precipitation is often followed. 3, 4, 6, 35, 40

**Water vapor** Evaporated water in a gaseous form. 6, 36

**Weather rendering system** The Unity application that is implemented during this project. It takes in live data from a weather service and uses topological elevation models to create a weather simulation, which is then rendered and up for comparison with live photographs. 5

**Weather front** A boundary between two air masses, which differ in temperature, wind direction and humidity. 2, 35, 37

**WMO** A specialized agency conducting atmospheric science, climatology, hydrology and geophysics. 5

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