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Discrete Computational Structures

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The Traveling Trader

Forex Arbitrage is an NP-hard problem in which one aims to generate a risk-free gain by exploiting the discrepancies between the current market prices of a series of currencies. The most common form of arbitrage that is implemented is Triangle Arbitrage. In this form of arbitrage, the discrepancies between the exchange rates of three currency pairs are traded to produce a small profit. Triangle Arbitrage optimizes for execution speed rather than return on investment on the basis that exchange rates move considerably over short periods of time. We believe that this is not the case and that exchange rates are held generally constant over a period in the magnitude of seconds. As a result of this belief, we created a program that identifies the series of currency exchanges that generates the highest return on investment using recursive backtracking based on an input of a matrix of currency exchange rates taken at the beginning of the program.

The set of all foreign exchange prices represented in a currency matrix can be converted into a weighted directional complete graph that can be stored as an adjacency list. The input of the arbitrage identifier is a Comma Separated Values file which represents a currency matrix. A currency matrix is a matrix in which the exchange rate between two currencies is represented by the cell with the row of the initial currency and the column of the final currency. In this graph, each currency can be represented by a vertex, and the exchange rate between the currencies is the weight of the edge. The graph which is generated using this procedure is complete because there exists a unique exchange rate between any two currencies in the matrix. Furthermore, the graph is weighted because the exchange rate between any two vertices on the graph varies and as a result, certain paths have different weights than others. The graph of the currency exchange rates is directional because the exchange rate between any two currencies is neither equivalent to each other nor is the inverse of the rate in the opposite direction. This difference in rates is caused by transaction fees levied on the sales of currencies to market makers. The program utilizes an Adjacency List to efficiently store the information of the graph in a form which allows for efficient traversal. An Adjacency List is a data structure which for all vertices in a graph records each of the vertices adjacent to a given vertex and the cost to move to every vertex in that list.

The program can identify the sequence of best trades by generating the set of all simple circuits through the graph and generating a cost function based on a product of each of the moves exchange rates. The series of trades which are used in an arbitrage is a closed walk. This is because the currency of the beginning and ending trades must be the same for the user to realize a profit. While it is true that a closed walk can generate an output, which represents a series of desired trades, for the practical purpose of preventing infinite loops from occurring while traversing the graph, the solution set to the arbitrage question is limited to all simple circuits. This prevention is caused by simple circuit’s prohibition of repeats of non-terminating vertices. This prohibition limits the number of exchanges which can occur in a trade to the number of currencies in the matrix from an earlier potentially infinite amount. The set of all simple circuits is derived in the program using a recursive backtracking algorithm. This algorithm begins at a starting currency and generates a solution by recursively adding a random adjacent vertex to the solution until the point that either there are no adjacent vertices, or a currency is repeated, or the base currency is reached. If the base currency is reached, the path is recorded and compared against other paths to determine its return. The return is determined by the product of the exchange rates of each of the currency pairs. In all three cases, the previous transaction is discarded, and another vertex is considered. This process repeats until all potential traversals have been completed. By going through all the potential trades and determining their return, the chain of trades with the highest return can be found.

The implementation of our program with real world data sets indicates that Closed Circuit Arbitrage can generate strong returns on capital in short periods of time. When testing the program using a currency matrix derived from the Factset database, the program consistently returns a path which generates a positive profit. The data which is used as the input for the program is indicative of real-world conditions. This is because that currency matrix originates from Factset a financial data which provides delayed currency market quotes given to the nearest pip which is the degree to which most exchange rates are quoted to. Based on the realistic data input, the positive return seen in all of the programs outputs ranging generally from a gain of 0.2 to 0.4% is supportive of the usable of the program.