

Defining Fractal Dimension

Author: R. Scott McIntire

Date: Mar 6, 2024

Introduction

In this paper we examine a notion of the size of a set called *fractal dimension* that enables one to more finely distinguish the density of a given set than the usual dimensional classification of 0, 1, 2, or 3*. Such a notion is motivated by sets that, while defined in one of the given dimensions 0, 1, 2, or 3 are sufficiently complicated that their dimensional “volume” is infinite. Sets that have the property that they retain structure no matter how much they are magnified are a class of such complex sets. We call this class of sets *fractal sets*, or *fractals*.

A common place example of a fractal is the beach line of a coast. If one were to take a map of the coast line and blow it up again and again, one would find that it always retains structure in the sense that the expanded maps would never straighten out. Because of this, the length of any section of a beach is infinite. Another natural fractal is the surface of a sponge; its area is infinite even though it is defined as a two dimensional object. It would be convenient if there was a way to measure the density of a coast line to indicate that it is, in some sense, larger than a one dimensional object; or a way to show that the surface of a sponge is larger than two dimensions. This would allow us to compare the “size” of such sets in a more precise way.

This is what the fractal dimension of a set tries to address. In the case of the coast line, it will give us a dimension between one and two – where the coast line “naturally” lives. The same with the surface of a sponge, there will be a dimension between two and three where it naturally lives. In each case, the fractal dimension is not an actual dimension, it is a way to quantify the density of such complex sets.

When studying any new phenomenon, it is natural to first examine the simplest examples. The simplest such fractals are ones which have a *self similarity* property; namely, they have the property that if one magnifies a piece of the fractal by a certain amount, the original fractal is recovered. This regular structure makes them easier to study mathematically than a general fractal. However, before we start with more specific examples of fractals, we need to understand what one might mean by fractal dimension.

Volume of an n Dimensional Sphere

The n dimensional volume of any sphere is easy to compute if one knows the n dimensional surface area of the n dimensional unit sphere, B_n . This follows from the formula:†

$$n \text{ dimensional volume of sphere of radius } R = \int_{\partial B_n} \int_0^R r^{n-1} dS dr$$

$$n \text{ dimensional volume of sphere of radius } R = (\text{Surface area of unit } n \text{ dimensional sphere}) \frac{R^n}{n}$$

The surface area of B_n can be computed by expressing an easily computable integral as an integral involving the area of the unit n dimensional sphere.

$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-(x_1^2+x_2^2+\dots+x_n^2)} dx_1 dx_2 \dots dx_n = \int_{\partial B_n} \int_0^{\infty} e^{-r^2} r^{n-1} dS dr$$

* The zero dimension of a set is the number of points in that set.

† The symbols, ∂B_n , mean the surface of the unit n dimensional sphere.

The left side of the above is just the integral $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-x^2} dx$ raised to the n th power; which is $\pi^{n/2}$. Substituting $t = r^2$ in the inner integral on the right hand side we have:

$$\pi^{n/2} = \frac{1}{2} \int_{\partial B_n} \int_0^{\infty} e^{-t} t^{\frac{n}{2}-1} dt dS$$

which may be written:

$$2\pi^{n/2} = (\text{surface area of the } n \text{ dimensional unit sphere}) \Gamma(n/2)$$

Or,

$$\text{surface area of the } n \text{ dimensional unit sphere} = \frac{2\pi^{n/2}}{\Gamma(n/2)}$$

The volume of the unit sphere, $\text{Vol}(B_n)$, is now computed using the surface area of the unit sphere:

$$\text{Vol}(B_n) = \int_{B_n} d\mu = \int_{\partial B_n} \int_0^1 r^{n-1} dr dS = (\text{surface area of the } n \text{ dimensional unit sphere}) * \frac{1}{n}$$

Or,

$$\text{Vol}(B_n) = \frac{2\pi^{n/2}}{n \Gamma(n/2)}$$

and so the volume of an n dimensional sphere, S_n , of radius r is

$$\text{Vol}(S_n) = \frac{2\pi^{n/2}}{n \Gamma(n/2)} r^n$$

Fractal Dimension and Associated Volume

Although we derived the formula for the n dimensional volume of a sphere, with n an integer, the formula may take non integral values. Armed with this formula, we make the following definition.

Definition. The $\alpha \in R^+$ dimensional volume, V_α , of a sphere of radius r is defined to be:

$$\text{Vol}_\alpha(r) = \frac{2\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha \Gamma(\alpha/2)} r^\alpha$$

This is a mathematical construct, not a physical one; there is no claim here of a physical fractional dimension.

We now define an intermediate notion that will help us define fractal dimension and fractal volume.

Definition. The $\alpha \in R^+$ dimensional covering volume of a set $S \in R^n$, $V_\alpha(S)$, with parameter, $\epsilon \in R^+$, is defined as*

$$V_{\alpha,\epsilon}(S) = \inf_{\{O_i\}_{i=1}^N} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^N \text{Vol}_\alpha(\text{Diam}(O_i)/2) : S \subseteq \bigcup_{i=1}^N O_i \wedge \sup_{i \in [1,N]} (\text{Diam}(O_i)) \leq \epsilon \right\}$$

* The diameter of a set is defined by: $\text{Diam}(S) = \sup\{|x - y| : x, y \in S\}$. The set R^+ is defined by: $R^+ = \{x \mid x \in R \wedge x \geq 0\}$

Roughly speaking, the α covering volume of a set is the best α volume estimate one could get if limited to finite covering sets with diameters no larger than ϵ .

Using the covering volume, we may define a fractional dimensional volume.

Definition. The $\alpha \in R^+$ dimensional volume of a set $S \in R^n$, $V_\alpha(S)$, is defined as

$$V_\alpha(S) = \lim_{\epsilon \rightarrow 0^+} V_{\alpha, \epsilon}(S)$$

In simple terms, this defines the α dimensional volume of S to be the limit of the covering estimates as the coverings become more refined.

While these statements define α volume for any given set, S , they do not tell us what the "natural" fractal volume of S . The following definition does precisely that.

Definition. The **fractal dimension** of a set $S \in R^m$ is defined as $\alpha^* = \inf\{\alpha : V_\alpha(S) = 0\}$; the **fractal volume** of S is $V_{\alpha^*}(S)$.

Roughly speaking, this says that the fractal dimension of a set S is the "smallest" α such that the α dimensional volume of S is non-zero.

Computing the Fractal Dimension of a Simple Set

The fractal dimension of a set S should produce the usual answer when S is a non-fractal set. We show this for the case of a straight line.

Example: A line segment in two dimensions.

We wish to find the fractal dimension and fractal volume of the line segment $L = \{t\mathbf{x} + (1-t)\mathbf{y} : t \in [0, 1], \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in R^2\}$. For a given n , consider the sets $\{O_{n,i}\}_{i=0}^{n-1}$, with $O_{n,i} = [\frac{i}{n}\mathbf{x} + (1-\frac{i}{n})\mathbf{y}, \frac{i+1}{n}\mathbf{x} + (1-\frac{i+1}{n})\mathbf{y}]$. The collection of line segments, $O_{n,i}$, act as a cover for L ; that is, $L = \cup_{i=0}^{n-1} O_{n,i}$. For a given α the α covering volume of L is given by

$$\sum_{i=0}^{n-1} \text{Vol}_\alpha(\text{Diam}(O_{n,i})/2) = \sum_{i=0}^{n-1} \text{Vol}_\alpha(\|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|/2n) = \sum_{i=0}^{n-1} \frac{2\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \frac{\|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|^\alpha}{(2n)^\alpha} = \frac{2\pi^{\alpha/2}\|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|^\alpha}{2^\alpha \alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \frac{n}{n^\alpha}$$

As n increases, the covering becomes more refined and the α dimensional volume is dominated by the term $\frac{n}{n^\alpha}$. Clearly, this term tends to zero as n tends to infinity for $\alpha > 1$. That is, $V_\alpha(L) = 0$ for $\alpha > 1$. The smallest α that yields a non-zero value is $\alpha = 1$. In this case $V_1(L) = \frac{2\pi^{\alpha/2}\|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|^\alpha}{2^\alpha \alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \Big|_{\alpha=1} = \|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|$. Therefore, the fractal dimension of the line segment is 1 and its fractal volume is the length of the line segment, $\|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|$. This, of course, coincides with what we would previously regard as the dimension and "volume" of a line segment.

This result is true for any "ordinary" set: its fractal dimension is its "ordinary" dimension. This means that we can think of fractal dimension as a *generalization* of dimension. It is instructive to repeat the above analysis and compute the fractal dimension and fractal volume of a simple fractal.

The Cantor Set: A Simple Fractal Set

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the simplest fractals to study are the ones with regular behavior; in particular, fractals with a self similarity property are more mathematically tractable. Perhaps the simplest

fractal of this type is the Cantor set. It is a self-similar set formed by doing the following: Take the unit interval, $[0,1]$, and remove the middle third, $(1/3, 2/3)$. This leaves the intervals, $[0,1/3]$ and $[2/3,1]$. Now remove the middle third of each of these two intervals, this gives four intervals. If we repeat this process indefinitely with the remaining intervals, the resulting set is called the Cantor set, C . See figure 1 below. The Cantor set has the property that $3 * ([0, 1/3] \cap C) = C$; that is, it is a self-similar fractal.

The one dimensional length of the Cantor set is easy to compute, it must be one (the length of the interval $[0,1]$) less the sum of all the lengths of the intervals removed. This is computed as $1 - \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} (2^{n-1}/3^n) = 1 - \frac{1}{2} \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} (2/3)^n = 0$. Since the Cantor set has zero length, perhaps its zero dimensional “length” is a more natural description of its size. But its zero dimensional length is equal to the number of points in the Cantor set; and, it turns out that this is infinite. What’s more startling is that, in a sense that can be made precise, there are as many points in the Cantor set as there are in the interval $[0,1]$. So, although the Cantor set has no length, it is comparable in complexity to $[0,1]$. This suggests that it might have a natural dimension between zero and one.

The Fractal Dimension of the Cantor Set and its Volume

We compute the fractal dimension of the Cantor set. To do so, consider a refinement of coverings of the Cantor set, C_n , where C_n is the union of the set of 2^n intervals that remain after the n^{th} stage of the Cantor construction process. Each of these intervals has length $(1/3)^n$. Clearly, $C \subseteq C_n$, and $C = \cap_{n=1}^{\infty} C_n$.

We label $I_{n,i}$ as the i^{th} interval in the set C_n . The collection, $\bigcup_{i=1}^{2^n} I_{n,i}$, provides an approximation to $V_{\alpha}(C)$:

$$V_{\alpha}(C) \approx \sum_{i=1}^{2^n} \text{Vol}_{\alpha}(\text{Diam}(I_{n,i})/2)$$

As $\text{Diam}(I_{n,i}) = (\frac{1}{3})^n$, this becomes

$$V_{\alpha}(C) \approx \sum_{n=1}^{2^n} \frac{2\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)2^{\alpha}3^{n\alpha}} \approx \frac{2^{1-\alpha}\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \sum_{n=1}^{2^n} \frac{1}{3^{n\alpha}}$$

Or,

$$V_{\alpha}(C) \approx \frac{2^{1-\alpha}\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \left(\frac{2}{3^{\alpha}}\right)^n$$

If $\frac{2}{3^{\alpha}} < 1$ then, in the limit as $n \rightarrow \infty$ this limit will be zero. Certainly, this is the case for $\alpha \geq 1$; in which case

$$V_{\alpha}(C) = \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{2^{1-\alpha}\pi^{\alpha/2}}{\alpha\Gamma(\alpha/2)} \left(\frac{2}{3^{\alpha}}\right)^n = 0$$

The smallest value of α that gives a non-zero $V_{\alpha}(C)$ is α such that $\frac{2}{3^{\alpha}} = 1$. This occurs when $\alpha^* = \ln 2 / \ln 3$. Therefore, the fractal dimension of the Cantor set is $\alpha^* = \ln 2 / \ln 3 \approx 0.63093$. Its fractal volume in this dimension is $V_{\alpha^*}(C) = \frac{2^{1-\alpha^*}\pi^{\alpha^*/2}}{\alpha^*\Gamma(\alpha^*/2)} \approx 1.03505$.

Conclusion

We have shown that there are sets with sufficient complexity that the usual categorization of dimension as a measure of size is lacking. We have further shown that the notion of fractal dimension, as an extension to the usual notion of dimension, provides a more discriminating view of the size of a set.

While physical examples like a coast line or the surface of a sponge do not really have complexity on an infinite scale, we idealize them as such with fractals. Just as “dimensionless” points are an idealization useful to describe space, fractals also are a useful idealization. As with all such mathematical abstractions, they allows us to view and compute what they model in a simpler way.

Appendix A: Examples of Self-Similar Fractals

We describe the construction of two fraction sets. The first set lives in 1 dimension, but its fractal dimension is between 0 and 1. . . The set is called the Cantor set, named after the mathematician Georg Cantor. This set may be created by creating intermediary sets C_0, C_1, \dots and setting the Cantor set, C , to be the intersection of these sets:

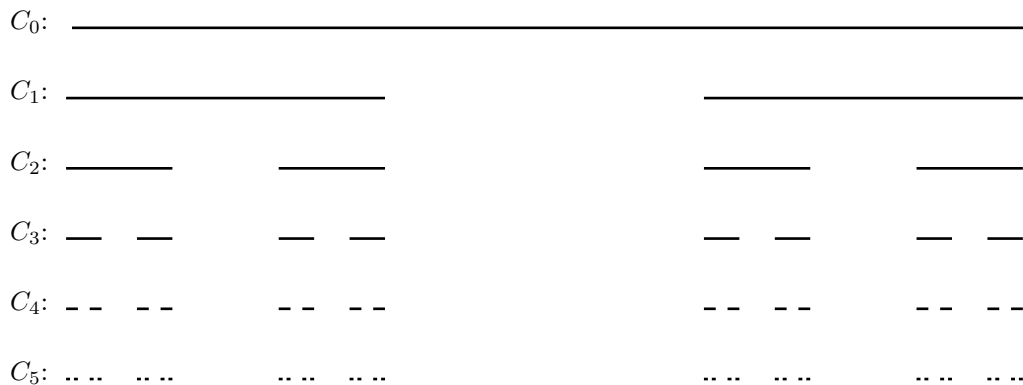
$$C = \cap_{n=0}^{\infty} C_n$$

The intermediate sets have the property that $\forall n, C_{n+1} \subseteq C_n$. These sets are defined by:

$$C_0 = [0, 1]$$

C_{n+1} = For each contiguous segment of the set C_n , remove the open interval that is its middle third.

As the sets, C_n , are nested, each successive set is an improved approximation to the Cantor set. The first 6 intermediate sets are graphed below:



The second set is another self-similar set which lives in 2 dimensions while its fractal dimension is between 1 and 2. The set is a scaled version of the lower triangular portion of itself.

Similar to the graphical display of the Cantor set construction, below we show 8 "levels" of construction detail.

