

# An Algorithm For Spatial Mapping Using a Hexagon Telegram, With Application to Australian Maps

by Stephanie Kobakian, Dianne Cook

**Abstract** This algorithm creates a hexagon to represent each of the spatial polygons provided. It allocates these hexagon in a manner that preserves the spatial relationship of the areas. It showcases spatial distributions, by emphasising the small geographical regions that are often difficult to locate on large geographic maps.

## Introduction

Spatial distributions have utilised alternative representations of geography for many years. In modern times, interactivity and animation have begun to play a larger role, as alternative representations have been popularised by online news sites, and atlas websites with a focus on public consumption. Applications are increasingly widespread, especially in the areas of disease mapping, and election results.

Choropleths are the current best practice approach for presenting geographical data as maps highlight the geographic patterns in geospatially related statistics [SAMGIS]. The land on the map space is divided to separate each area, these boundaries are usually administrative. The areas are filled with colour to represent the value of the statistic for the area [EI].

In Australia, government bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or the Australian Electoral Commission hold the responsibility for the division of areas. These boundaries are often adjusted as the population in areas increase. Australian people are increasingly congregating around major cities, the rural areas are often sparsely populated in comparison to the urban centres. The division of the population into equal population areas results in dramatically different square meterage of the geographic areas. This results in an unequal presentation of the statistic in each area, this can misrepresent the spatial distributions of the human related statistics in geographic maps.

Beginning with the geography, cartograms apply a transformation to place importance on the statistic of interest. They result in a distortion of the map space to represent differences in the statistic. These displays rely on the statistic of interest to determine the layout, however for Australia, many cartograms fail to preserve a recognisable display. Contiguous cartograms change the shape of an area, preserving neighbouring relationships. Non-contiguous cartograms maintain the shape of each area, but lose the connection to neighbours.

Alternative maps shift the focus from land area, to the value of the statistics in a group of areas. Alternative mapping methods allow increased understanding of the spatial distribution of a variable across the population, by fairly representing each administrative area.

Tilegrams are an extension of Dorling cartograms, using one simple shape to represent each area. This allows preservation of spatial relationships and decreases the emphasis from the amount of geographic area. These maps focus on the relationship between neighbours attempting to preserve connections, and disregard the unique shapes of the administrative boundaries.

The sugarbag package provides a new method to implement hexagon tilegrams. Extending the telegram to Australian applications required preserving the spatial relationships. It emphasises the capital cities as population hubs, and recognises the distances between locations of populations distributed across the large rural areas.

## Algorithm

This solution operates on a set of `sf` polygons.

There are four necessary tasks to create a hexagon telegram. These steps can be executed by the main function, `create_hexmap`, or can be applied separately for more flexibility.

They perform the following tasks: - Create the set of centroids to allocate - Create the set of hexagons to use - Allocate each centroid to an available hexagon - Transform the data for plotting

There are parameters used in the process that may be provided, or will be automatically derived.

## Use the sugarbag package

### Parameters

The `create_hexmap` function requires several parameters, if they are not provided, the information will be derived from the polygon set used. If users already have a grid and set of centroids they may choose to only use the `allocate` function.

**The following must be provided to `create_hexmap`:**

parameter	description
<code>shp</code>	an sf object containing the polygon information
<code>sf_id</code>	name of a column that distinguishes unique areas
<code>focal_points</code>	a data frame of reference locations used to allocate hexagons

### Example data

The polygon set of Local Government Areas of Tasmania in 2016 is provided with the sugarbag package as `tas_lga`. A single column of the data set must be used as a unique identifier of areas. In this case, the unique LGA codes associated with each LGA have been used.

The longitude and latitude centre of the capital cities of Australia are used to allocate areas around the closest capital city.

**The following parameters will be determined within `create_hexmap` if not provided. They are created throughout the following example:**

parameter	description
<code>buffer_dist</code>	a float value for distance in degrees to extend beyond the geometry provided
<code>hex_size</code>	a float value in degrees for the diameter of the hexagons
<code>hex_filter</code>	amount of hexagons around centroid to consider for allocation
<code>width</code>	the angle used to filter the grid points around a centroid

### Create the set of centroid points

When utilising individual sugarbag functions, we recommend the following approach: Begin with a set of polygons. The set should be provided as an sf object, this is a data frame containing a geometry column.<sup>1</sup> We will use the Local Government Areas of Tasmania, downloaded from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The centroids can be derived from the set of polygons:

### Hexagon grid

A tilegram allows areas to be allocated to a tessellated set of tiles. The grid is created to ensure a close point is found, that ensures tessellation with other previously allocated points.

The grid of possible hexagon centroids can be made using the `create_grid` function. The grid creation requires several steps. It uses the centroids, the hexagon size and the buffer distance.

#### Step 1: Expand the grid

A sequence is created for longitude columns, and another for latitude rows.

The sequences begin at the minimum longitude (latitude), minus the buffer distance. Equally spaced intervals the size of the hexagons are created up to the maximum longitude (latitude), plus the buffer distance.

An individual point is created from all intersections of the longitude columns and latitude row sequences.

A square grid will not facilitate tessellated hexagons. Every second latitude row of points will be shifted right by half of the hexagon size.

Each point is now given an ID.

<sup>1</sup>The `read_shape` function can assist in creating this object.

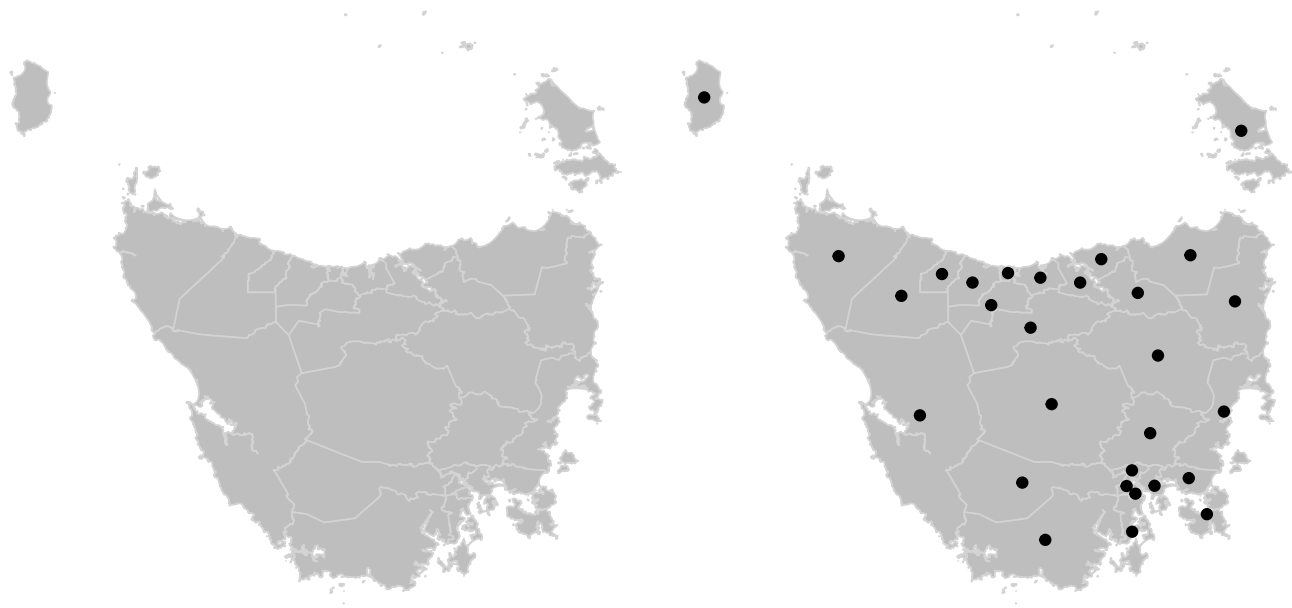


Figure 1: Local Government Areas and derived centroids.

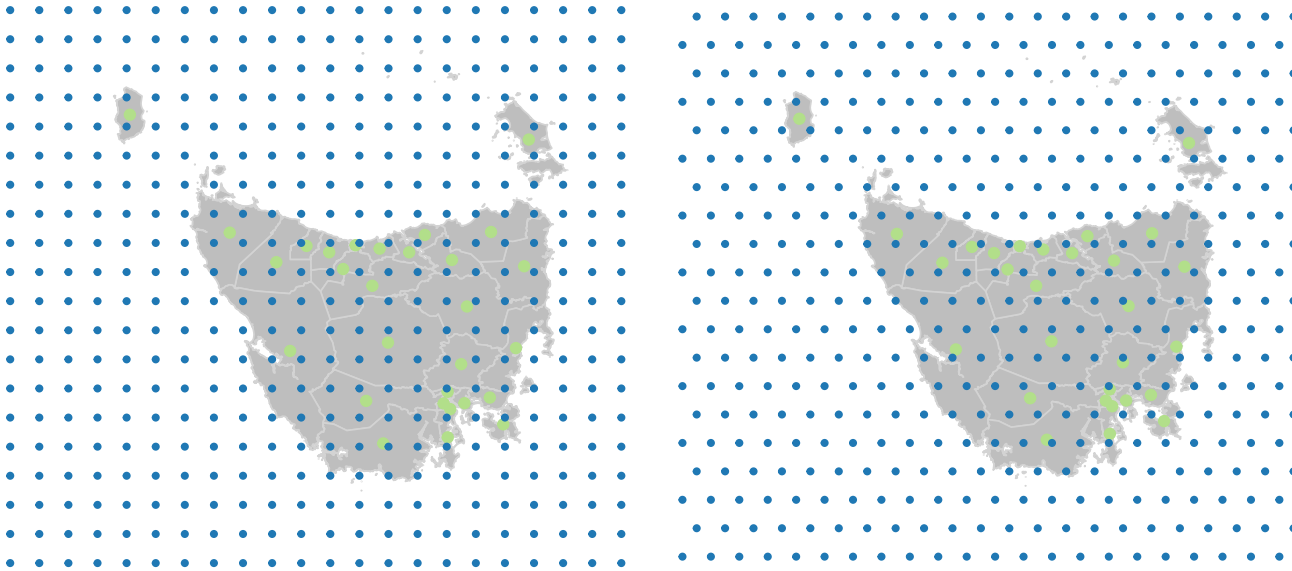


Figure 2: Grid points to create a tilegram.

## Step 2: Rolling windows

Not all of the grid points will be used, especially if islands result in a large grid space. To filter the grid for appropriate points for allocation, the `create_buffer` function is called from `create_grid`. It finds the grid points needed to best capture the set of centroids.

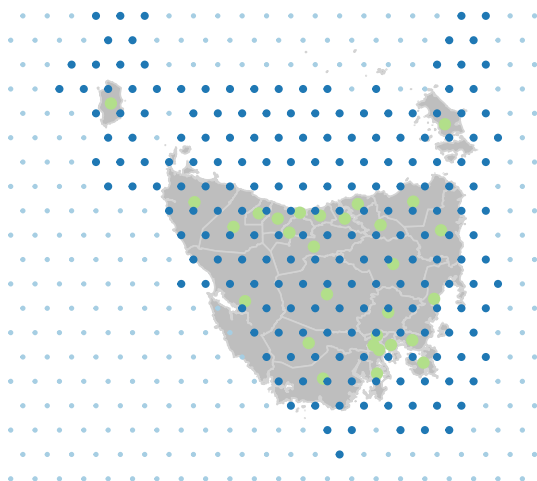
The rows and columns are divided into 20 groups. The amount of rows in each latitude group and the amount of columns in each longitude group are then used as the width of rolling windows. This will tailor the available grid points to the most likely to be used point. It also helps reduce amount of time taken, as it decreases the amount of points considered.

The first rolling window function finds the minimum and maximum centroid values for the sliding groups of longitude columns and the groups of latitude rows.

The second rolling window function finds the average of the rolling centroid values minimum and maximum, for the longitude columns and latitude rows.

## Step 3: Filtering the grid

Only the grid points between the rolling average of the minimum and maximum centroid values are kept, for each row and column of the grid.



## Centroid to focal point distance

For each polygon centroid in the set, the distance to each of the focal points provided is recorded. The closest focal point name, the distance to the polygon centroid, and the angle from focal point to polygon centroid will be added to the polygon's row, in the polygon data set. To minimise time taken for this step, only Tasmania's capital city Hobart has been provided.

The distance between the polygon centroid and its closest focal point data set is used to order the data set for allocation. The points are arranged in ascending order, from the centroid closest to any of the focal points, to the furthest.

## Allocation of centroids

The distance around a centroid to consider for possible hexagon locations is determined by the `hex_filter`. It multiplies the amount given by `hex_filter`, by the size of the hexagons to find the distance.

Allocation of all centroids can now take place using the set of polygon centroids and the hexagon map grid. For each polygon centroid, only the hexagon grid points that have not yet been used can be considered. Allocate each centroid, beginning with the closest centroid to a focal point. This will preserve spatial relationship with the capital, as the inner areas will be allowed closest to the capital, and the areas that are further will be accommodated after.

The filter parameter is used to subset possible grid points to only those surrounding the polygon centroid within the filter distance, smaller distance will increase speed, but can decrease accuracy.

The following example considers one of the Local Government Areas. These steps are repeated for each polygon.

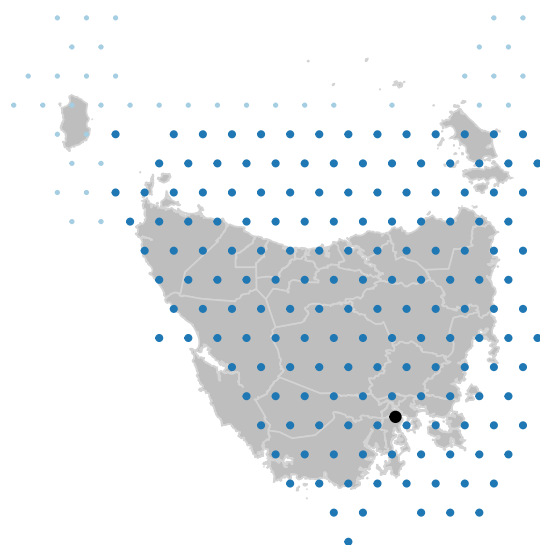
### Step 1: Filter the grid for unassigned hexagon points

Keep only the available hexagon points, this will prevent multiple areas being allocated to the same hexagon.

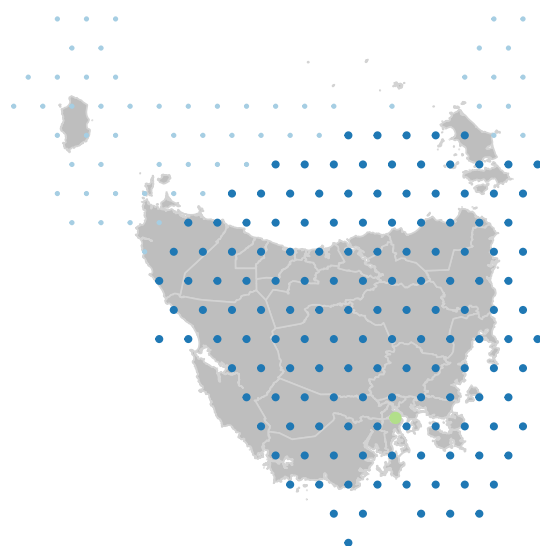
### Step 2: Filter the grid points for those closest to the centroid

This will allow only the closest points, that are not assigned, to be considered.

Create a box of possible hexagon locations around the centroid. The bottom of the box will not be square as the buffer has already removed unnecessary points from over the ocean.



The algorithm removes the outer corners of the square, creating a circle of points, by only keeping points within a certain radius around the original centroid location.

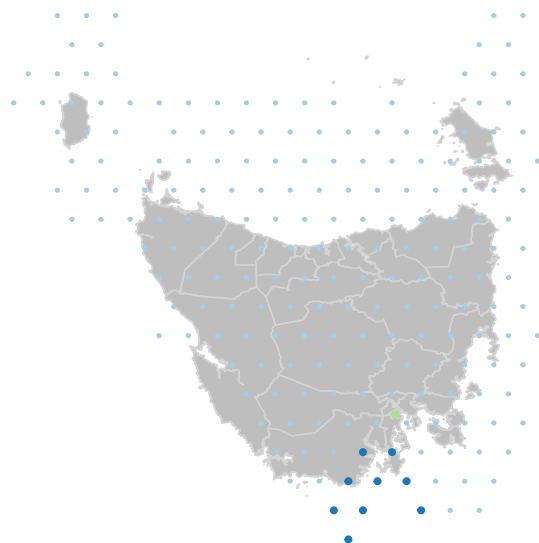


The width parameter is now used. Of the remaining points, a slice is taken. This uses the angle from the closest capital city, to the current centroid. If it is not the closest to the capital there may have been points available that were taken by closer centroids. This allows the spatial relationship to be preserved, even when it gets allocated to a hexagon that is further from the city centre. This angle begins at 30 degrees by default, and may increase if necessary.

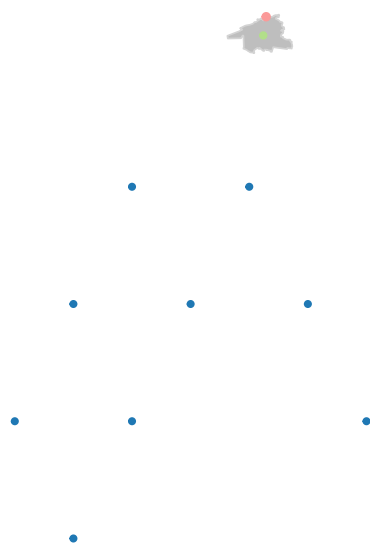
If no available hexagon grid point is found within the original filter distance and angle, the distance

is expanded, only when a maximum distance is reached will the angle expand to accommodate more possible grid points.

The allocation is returned and combined with the data relating to each polygon.



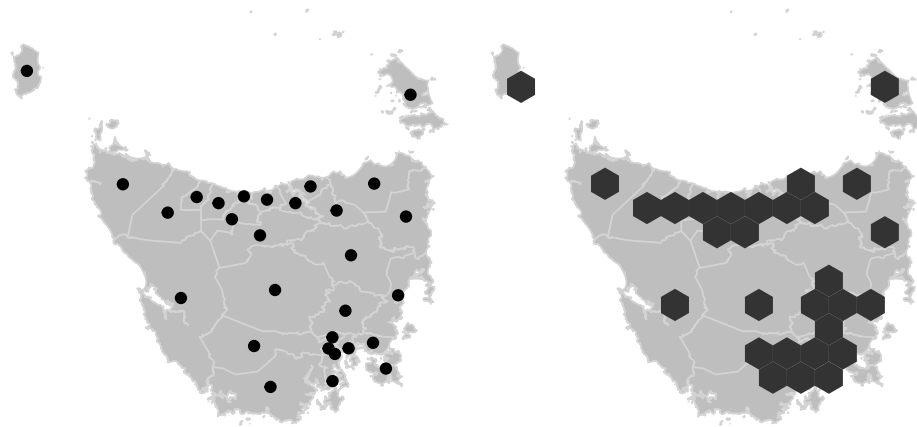
This area was the very closest to the Hobart central point (coloured pink) provided in the capital cities data set, it gets a hexagon point (coloured blue) extremely close to its centroid (coloured green).



The following code creates a map for all the Local Government Areas in Tasmania:

```
# Create centroids set
centroids <- create_centroids(tas_lga, "LGA_CODE16")
# Create hexagon location grid
grid <- create_grid(centroids = centroids,
  hex_size = 0.3,
  buffer_dist = 1.2)
# Allocate polygon centroids to hexagon grid points
hex_allocated <- allocate(
  centroids = centroids,
  hex_grid = grid,
  sf_id = "LGA_CODE16",
  # same column used in create_centroids
  hex_size = 0.3,
  # same size used in create_grid
  hex_filter = 10,
  focal_points = capital_cities %>% filter(points == "Hobart"),
```

```
width = 35,  
verbose = FALSE  
)
```



## Summary

It is possible to use alternative maps to communicate spatial distributions. Current methods do not always work for Australia due to the large gaps between densely populated capital cities.

## Code

This map algorithm is found in the `sugarbag` package, currently available on github: <https://github.com/srkobakian/sugarbag>

*Stephanie Kobakian*  
*Queensland University of Technology*

[stephanie.kobakian@monash.edu](mailto:stephanie.kobakian@monash.edu)

*Dianne Cook*  
*Monash University*

[dicook@monash.edu](mailto:dicook@monash.edu)