Configurations of Spheres

Wöden Kusner

Institute for Analysis and Number Theory
Graz University of Technology

University of Pittsburgh
August 2016

Abstract

In 1694, Newton and Gregory discussed how many non-overlapping unit spheres could be placed in contact with a central unit sphere: Is it 12 or possibly 13? This problem was unresolved until 1953, when Schütte and van der Waerden showed that 12 was the correct answer.

An alternate formulation, related to the Tammes best packing problem, is to consider the configuration space of 13 spheres touching a central sphere parametrized by radius and show that it is empty for radius 1.

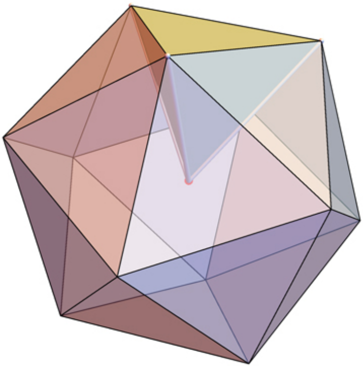
This point of view opens up a variety of new configurational problems, namely, how does the geometry and topology of such a configuration space change as the radius is varied?

We will discuss some of the history and the current state of these problems.

The Newton-Gregory Problem

Question

Is the regular icosahedron made of 20 regular tetrahedra?



Aristotle: On The Heavens (c. 350 B.C.)

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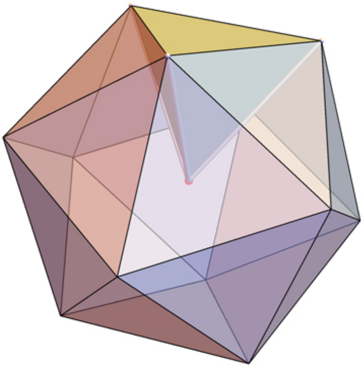
No! For circumradius 1, we can compute the edge length to be

$$\left(\frac{1}{2}\sqrt{\frac{1}{2}(5+\sqrt{5})}\right)^{-1} = 1.0514\ldots.$$



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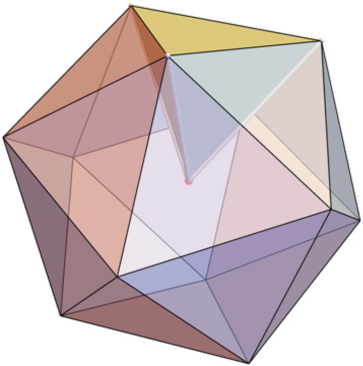
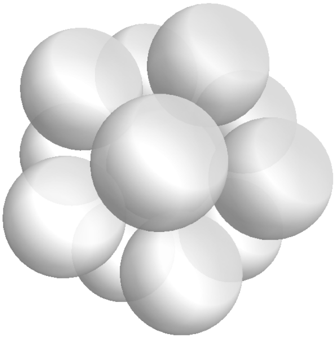
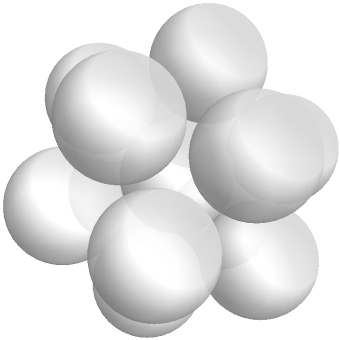


Remark

If we place unit spheres at the vertices of that regular icosahedron, there is a lot of space between them.





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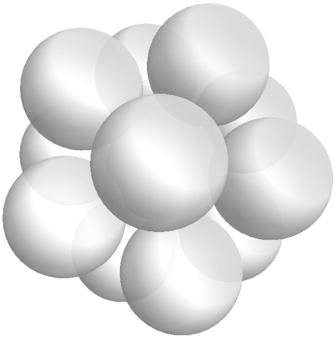
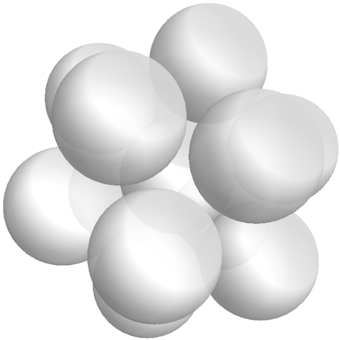
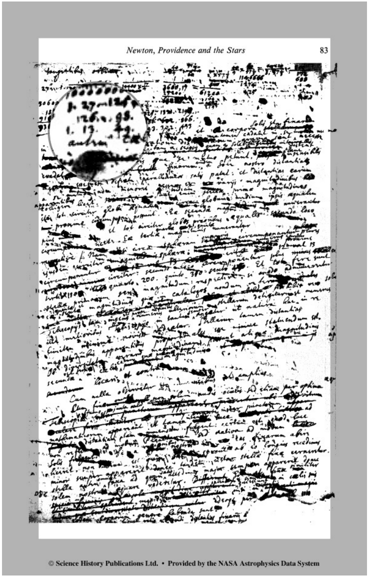




Question (Newton-Gregory)

Can we fit in a thirteenth sphere?



For Newton and Gregory, this was a problem of mechanics: Why the fixed stars don't all fall into the sun.

In a draft for the second edition of *Principia*, Newton considers stars of various magnitudes as modeled by arrangements of equal balls.

This method was abandoned, but history lends the names of Newton and Gregory to the problem.

Kepler: Epitome Astronomiae Copernicanae (c. 1620)

LIBER PRIMVS. 35

Si de fixis certius nihil conſtat, videtur illa regio infinita eſſe; nec Sol hic noſter aliud erit, quam una ex fixis, nobis major & clarior viſa, quia propior quam fixa: atq; ita circa quàlibet fixam poterit eſſe talis mundus, qualis circa nos eſt; Vel, quod eodem redit, inter innumerabiles locos in illa infinitâ fixarum congerie, Mundus hic noſter cum Sole ſuo erit unus, nulla re diverſus à locis alijs circa fixas ſingulares: Vt in ſubjecta figura litera M?

Ita quidem Brunus & veterum aliqui. At non ſequitur, ſi centra fixarum non ſunt in eadem ſuperficie Sphærica; propterea regionem per quam ſunt diſperſæ fixæ, eſſe vndiquaque ſibi ſimilem.

Habet enim illa omninò vacuum aliquem ſinum, cavumque ingens, à fixarum agmine, confertim circumfuſo,

C 2 ceu

36 EPITOMES ASTRONOMIÆ,

ceu à muro vel fornice quodam concluſum & circumſcriptum: & in hujus Cavi ingentis complexu, Tellus noſtra cum ſole & ſtellis mobilibus comprehenſa eſt.

Vide ſubjectam figuram.

Quod habes hujus rei Argumentum?

Si Regio fixarum vndique ſimiliter eſſet conſita ſtellis, etiam in vicinia noſtri mundi mobilis ſic ut ſitus mundi ſolisque noſtri nullam habere circumſcriptionem præ ſitu fixæ alicujus, nobis paucæ aliquæ fixæ ingentes, nec ul ot angulos habet Icoſaedron) poſſent dem à nobis diſtantiæ, & magnitudinis: haud multo plures, haberent jam diſtantiam duplicatam proximarum; aliæ ſuperiores triplicatam, & ſic conſequentes ſemper multipliciorem.

nc appare duodecim ſe omnes

Ac cùm omnium maximæ, tam appareant parvæ, ut vix inſtrumentis poſſint notari aut menſurari: quæ igitur duplo aut triplo &c. diſtarent longius, duplo & triplo apparerent minores, poſitis æqualibus ipſis veris magnitudinibus

Naive Bound

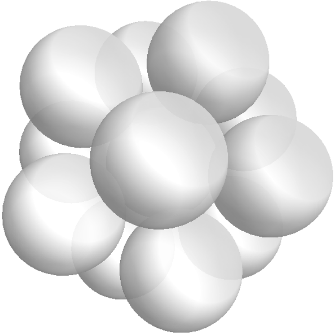
We know some good ways to arrange 12 spheres to touch a central one.

There is a bound given by the solid angle. Centrally projecting a to the surface of the central sphere, this region has area

$$2\pi(1 - \cos\frac{\pi}{6}) = .26\ldots$$

giving a bound of

$$\frac{4\pi}{2\pi(1 - \cos\frac{\pi}{6})} = 14.9\ldots.$$



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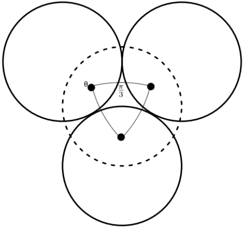
Less Naive Bound

Triangulate the contacts.



Assumption

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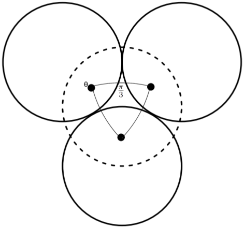

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From Euler characteristic: $v - e + f = 2$ and $3f = 2e$ for triangulations of the sphere, giving $f = 2v - 4$.

The minimal face area is

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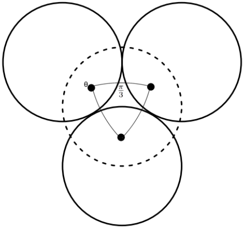

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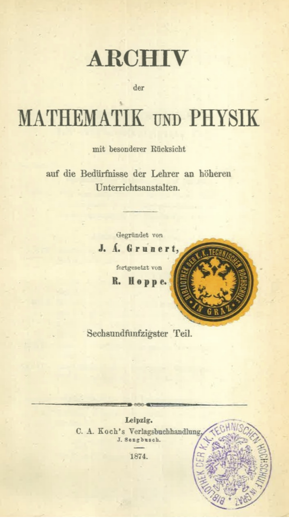
Then for $v = 13$

$$4\pi - 22 * T = 0.43...$$

but for $v = 14$

$$4\pi - 24 * T = -0.66\ldots.$$

Bender, Hoppe (c. 1874)


ARCHIV

der

MATHEMATIK UND PHYSIK

mit besonderer Rücksicht

auf die Bedürfnisse der Lehrer an höheren Unterrichtsanstalten.

Gegründet von

J. A. Grunert,

fortgesetzt von

R. Hoppe.

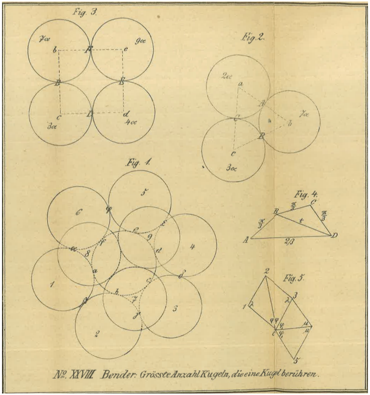
Sechsundfunfzigster Teil.

Leipzig.

C. A. Koch's Verlagsbuchhandlung,

J. Sengbusch.

1874.



Contact graphs: graphs with a vertex for each sphere and edges recording contact.

Schütte and van der Waerden, Leech (c. 1950)

Schütte and van der Waerden further analyzed such graphs and gave conditions on the contact graph showing that 13 unit spheres touching a central unit sphere would induce a graph that was not realizable.

Using similar techniques, Leech gave a proof consisting of only two pages. Much of this brevity seems to come from

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Theorem (Schütte and van der Waerden)

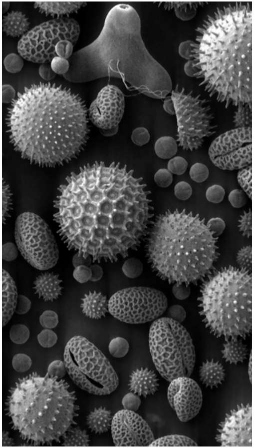
We can only fit twelve spheres.

The Tammes Problem

Question

What is the maximal radius possible for N equal spheres, all touching a central sphere of radius 1?

Another formulation of the *Tammes problem*: How many spherical caps of angular diameter θ that can be placed without overlap?



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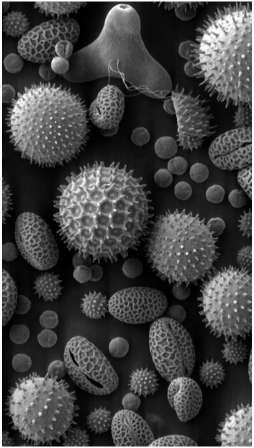
Tammes was studying pollen grains and empirically determined 6 for $\theta = \frac{2\pi}{4}$ but no more than 4 for $\theta > \frac{2\pi}{4}$.



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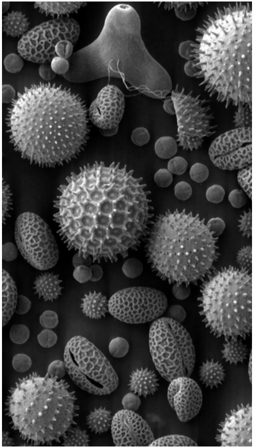
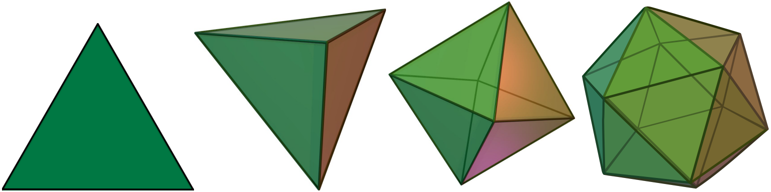


Remark

The maximizing configuration for 5 is not unique.

L. Fejes-Tóth (1943)

The Tammes problem was solved for $N = 3, 4, 6$ and 12, with configurations of cap centers for $N = 3$ attained by vertices of an equatorial equilateral triangle and for $N = \{4, 6, 12\}$ by vertices of regular tetrahedron, octahedron and icosahedron.



L. Fejes-Tóth (1943)

Fejes-Tóth proved the inequality

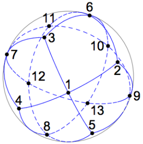
Theorem

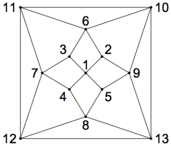
for N points on the sphere, there are 2 with angular distance

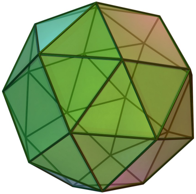
$$\theta \leq \arccos\left(\frac{(\cot(\omega)^2 - 1}{2}\right), \quad \omega = \left(\frac{N}{N-2}\right)\frac{\pi}{6}.$$

The inequality is sharp for $N = \{3, 4, 6, 12\}$.

The Tammes problem has been solved exactly for only $3 \leq N \leq 14$ and $N = 24$. It was solved for $N = \{5, 7, 8, 9\}$ by Schütte and van der Waerden in 1951, $N = \{10, 11\}$ by Danzer in his 1963 Habilitationsschrift.







$N = 24$ was solved by Robinson in 1961 showing the configuration of centers were the vertices of a snub cube. Recently the Tammes problem was solved for the cases $N = \{13, 14\}$ by Musin and Tarasov using `plantri` to generate all contact graphs.

Approximate Values

N	$\theta(N)$	$r(N)$	Configuration	Source
3	$\delta_3 = \frac{2\pi}{3} = 120^\circ$	$3 + 2\sqrt{3}$ $= 6.4641\ldots$	Equilateral Triangle	Fejes-Tóth (1943)
4	$\delta_4 = \arccos\left(-\frac{1}{3}\right)$ $\approx 109.4712^\circ$	$2 + \sqrt{6}$ $= 4.4494\ldots$	Regular Tetrahedron	Fejes-Tóth (1943)
5	$\delta_5 = \frac{2\pi}{4} = 90^\circ$	$1 + \sqrt{2}$ $= 2.4142\ldots$	[Regular Octahedron minus a vertex]	Fejes-Tóth (1943) Fejes-Tóth (1943)
6	$\delta_6 = \delta_5 = 90^\circ$	$1 + \sqrt{2}$ $= 2.4142\ldots$	Regular Octahedron	Fejes-Tóth (1943)
7	$\delta_7 \approx 77^\circ 52'$	$1.6913\ldots$	[NA]	Schutte and van der Waerden (1951)
8	$\delta_8 \approx 74^\circ 52'$	$1.5495\ldots$	Square Antiprism	Schutte and van der Waerden (1951)
9	$\delta_9 \approx 70^\circ 32'$	$1.3660\ldots$	[NA]	Schutte and van der Waerden (1951)
10	$\delta_{10} \approx 66^\circ 9'$	$1.2012\ldots$	[NA]	Danzer (1963)
11	$\delta_{11} \approx 63^\circ 26'$	$\frac{2}{\sqrt{5+\sqrt{5}}-2}$ ≈ 1.1085085	[Regular Icosahedron minus a vertex]	Danzer (1963)
12	$\delta_{12} = \delta_{11} \approx 63^\circ 26'$	$\frac{2}{\sqrt{5+\sqrt{5}}-2}$ $= 1.1085\ldots$	Regular Icosahedron	Fejes-Tóth (1943)
13	$\delta_{13} \approx 57.1367^\circ$	–	[NA]	Musin and Tarasov (2013)
14	$\delta_{14} \approx 55.67057^\circ$	–	[NA]	Musin and Tarasov (2015)
24	$\delta_{24} \approx 43^\circ 41'$	$0.5926\ldots$	Snub Cube	Robinson (1961)

Configuration Spaces

Variable Radii

Definition

$\mathrm{Conf}(n,r)$ is the configuration space of n non-intersecting balls of radius r on the sphere. (Equivalently, caps of radius θ.)

- For r small, $\mathrm{Conf}(n,r) \simeq \mathrm{Conf}(n,0)$.
- For r large, $\mathrm{Conf}(n,r) = \emptyset$.

Remark

The Tammes problem is equivalent to finding the maximal r such that $\mathrm{Conf}(n,r)$ is non-empty.

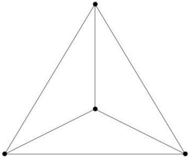
Remark

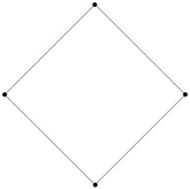
The result of Musin gives a solution to Newton-Gregory

Critical radii

There are certain radii that are critical in the sense of (stratified) Morse Theory: The topology of the configuration space changes.

These radii also correspond to configurations of points that are force balanced: There exists a non-trivial measure on the contact graph that balances all the vertices.





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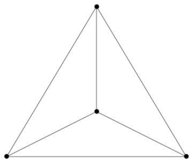
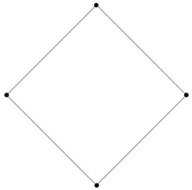




Remark

Such configurations obstruct the r-gradient flow, which normally gives a strong deformation retract.

For 4 points, we have

- $0 \leq \theta < \frac{2\pi}{4}$:

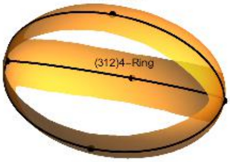
$$\mathrm{Conf}(4, r(\theta)) \simeq \mathrm{Conf}(n, 0)$$

- $\frac{2\pi}{4} < \theta \leq \arccos\left(-\frac{1}{3}\right)$:

$$\mathrm{Conf}(4, r(\theta)) \simeq \{0, 1\}$$

- $\theta > \arccos\left(-\frac{1}{3}\right)$:

$$\mathrm{Conf}(4, r(\theta)) = \emptyset$$



12 points: Frederick Charles Frank

Frank argued that the supercooling of liquids can occur because the common arrangements of molecules in liquids assumes configurations far from what they would assume if frozen.

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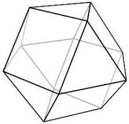
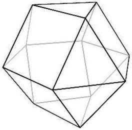
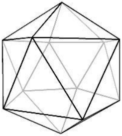
Frank argued that the supercooling of liquids can occur because the common arrangements of molecules in liquids assumes configurations far from what they would assume if frozen.

He claimed that there are exactly 3 configurations of 12 unit spheres next to a given central sphere: The FCC configuration, the HCP configuration, and the dodecahedral configuration.



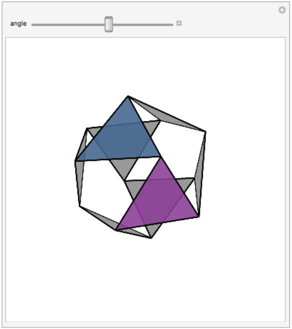


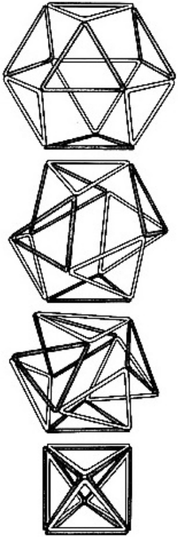


" Consider the question of how many different ways one can put twelve billiard balls in simultaneous contact with another one, counting as different the arrangements which cannot be transformed into each other without breaking contact with the centre ball?' The answer is *three*. Two which come to the mind of any crystallographer occur in the face-centred cubic and hexagonal close packed lattices. The third comes to the mind of any good schoolboy, and it is to put one at the center of each face of a regular dodecahedron. That body has five-fold axes, which are abhorrent to crystal symmetry: unlike the other two packings, this one cannot be continuously extended in three dimensions. You will find that the outer twelve in this packing do not touch each other."

— Frederick Charles Frank

The Jitterbug





Connects icosahedron to FCC.

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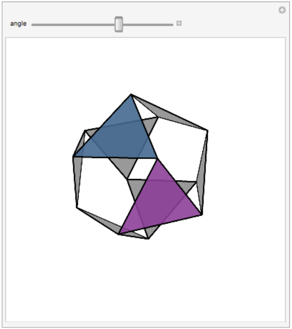

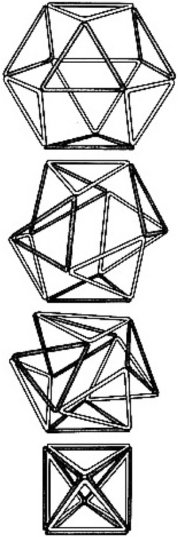

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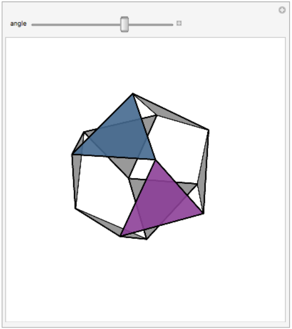

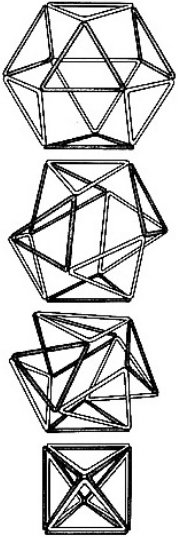

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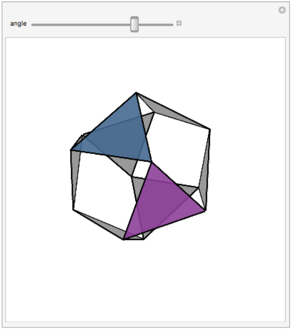

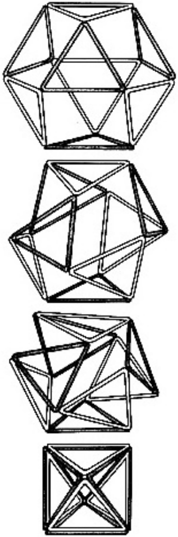

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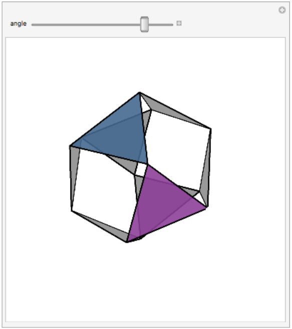

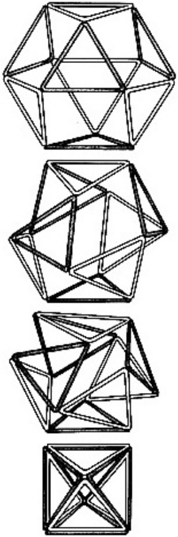

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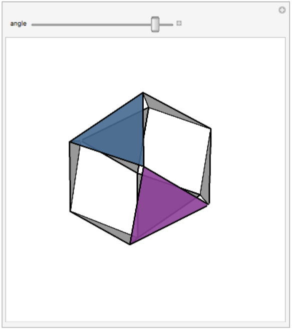

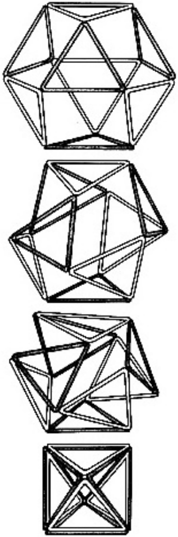

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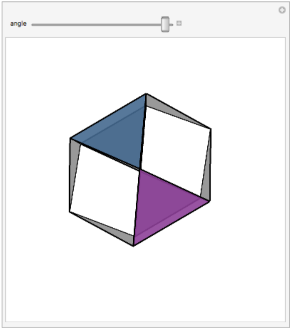

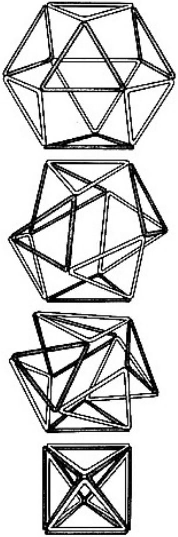

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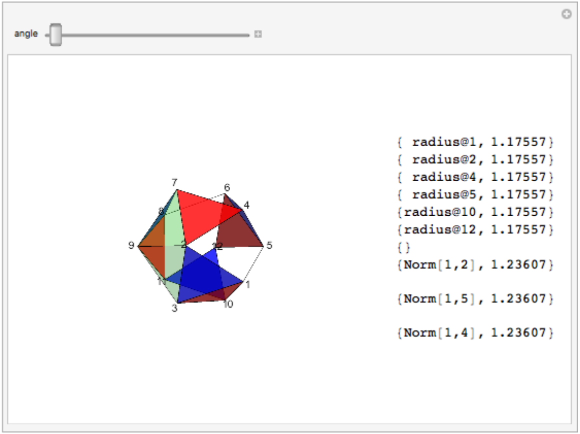
The Kagome Jitterbug



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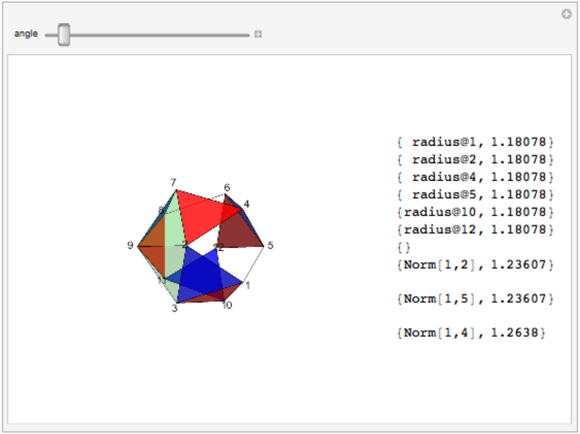

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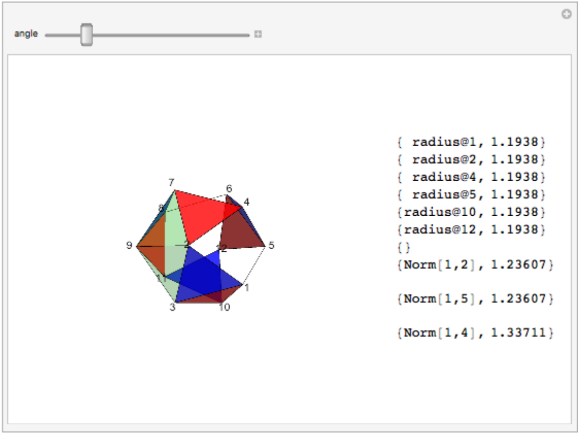

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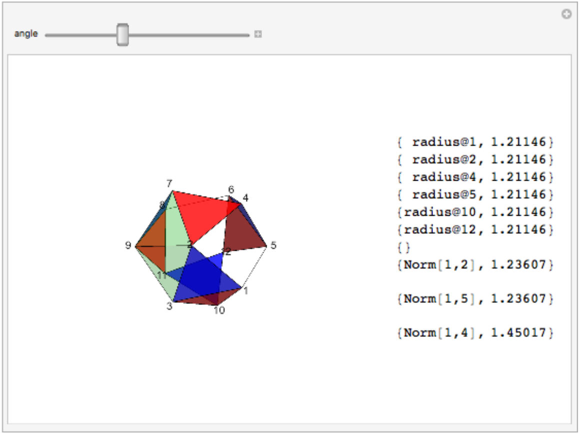

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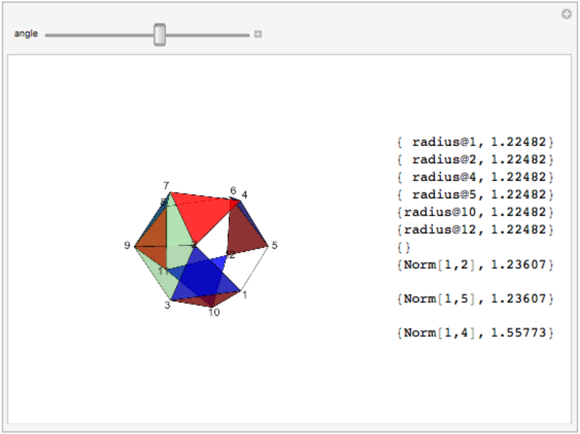

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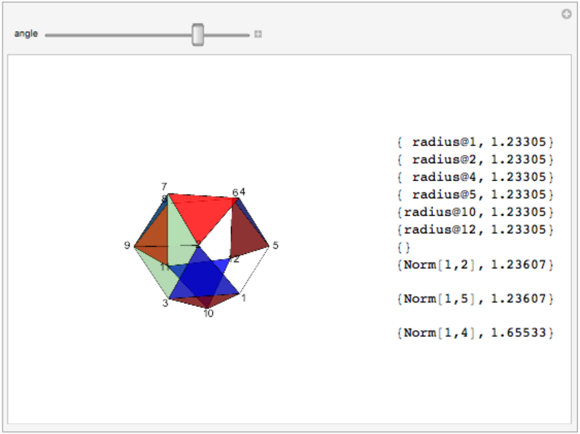

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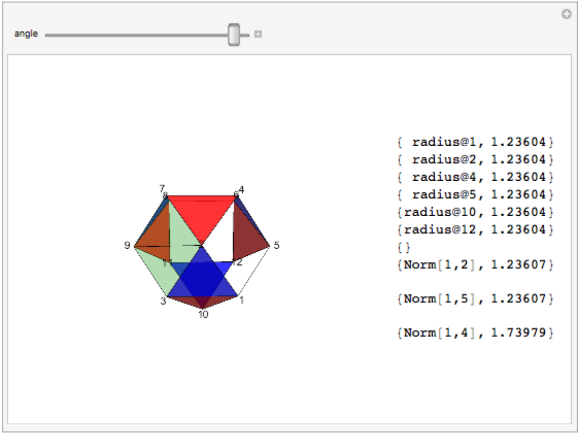

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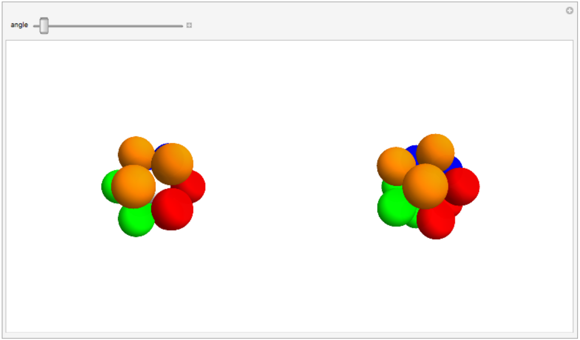
Motions of spheres



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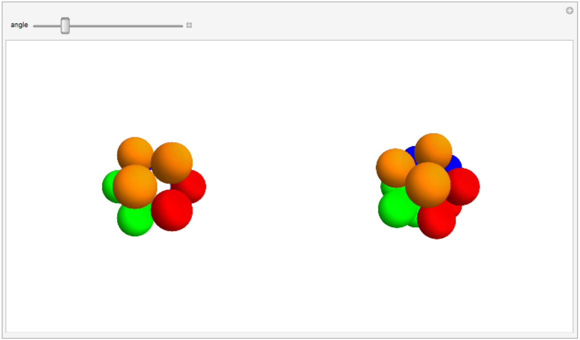

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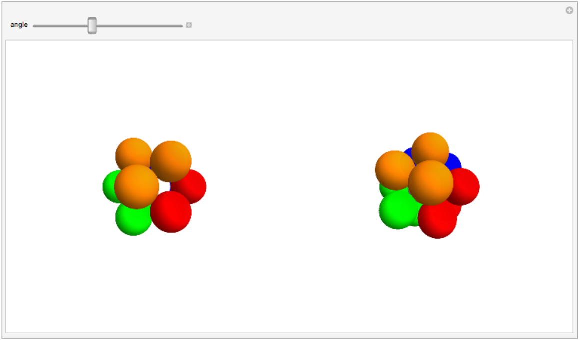

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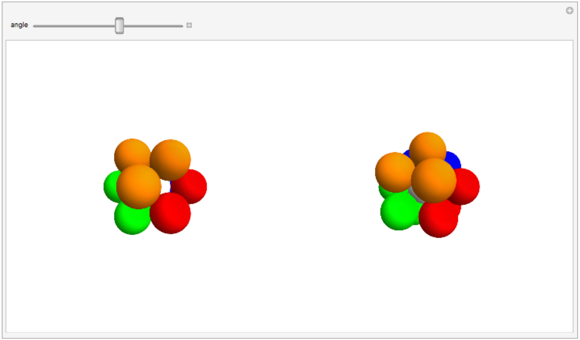

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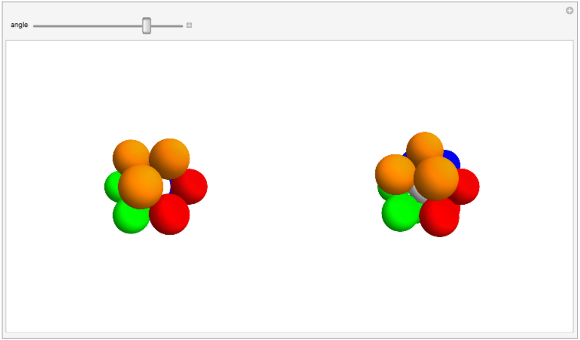

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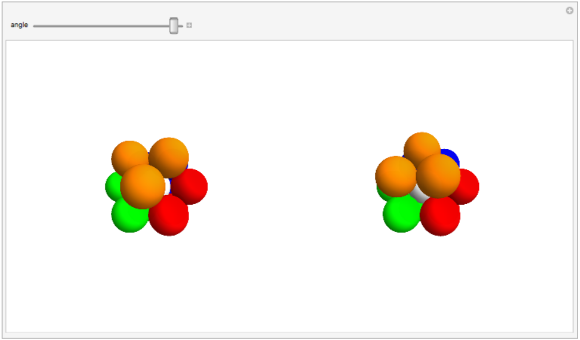

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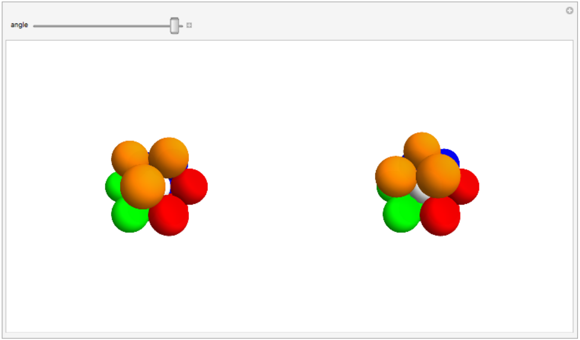

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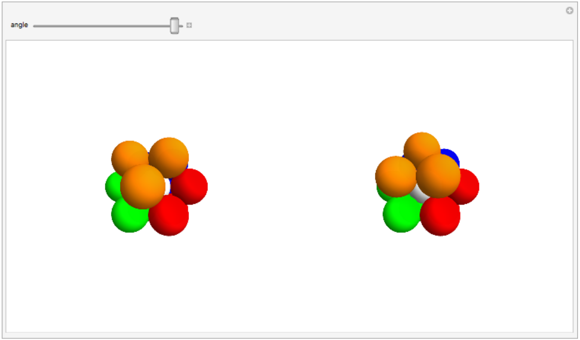

Motions of spheres

The assertion that there are exactly three arrangements is *false*. There *is* an underlying kernel of truth in this statement: each of three the arrangements above is “remarkable”.

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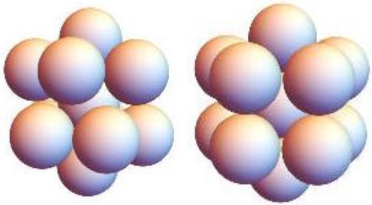
They demonstrate that within the component of configuration space of 12 unit spheres connected to the icosahedron, arbitrary permutations of all 12 touching spheres are possible.

An icosahedral "Rubik's cube"

The equatorial spheres can be moved towards poles and can be rotated to form half-geodesic graphs, like the bars of a birdcage.



The rings of five freely rotate relative to each other. Conway and Sloane note the conjugation action gives all 5-cycles.

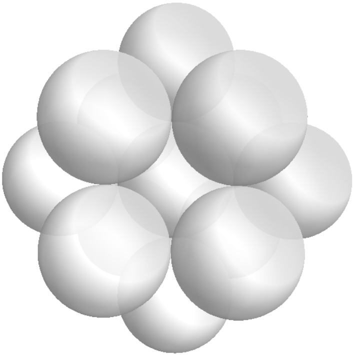
Remark

The fact that all 5-cycles can be produced this way is nontrivial. All 5-cycles generate A_{12}.

Hidden Symmetry

The Jitterbug gives a smooth motion from the icosahedron to the FCC configuration. This has an axis of 4-fold symmetry and 3 layers. Therefore conjugating a rotation with the Jitterbug describes an odd permutation.

With the icosahedral Rubik's cube, this generates all of S_{12}.



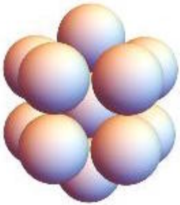
Theorem (Conway and Sloane)

Spheres at the vertices of a regular icosahedron can be arbitrarily permuted.

Higher critical radii for 12 points

For $1 + \epsilon > r > 1$,it is possible to get at least A_{12}.

In the “Rubik’s cube”, one can perturb 4 vertical pairs to so the radius can be increased slightly and 1 pair passes. This yields a different type of configuration, but the same idea applies.



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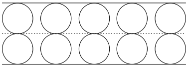

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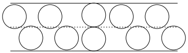

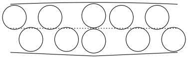

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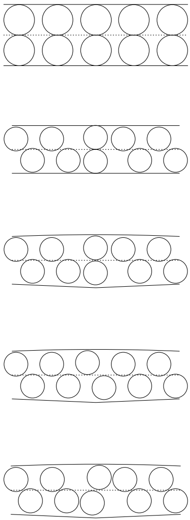

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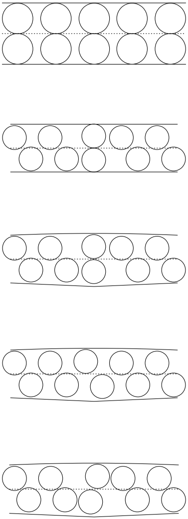

Remark

$\mathrm{Conf}(12, r)$ *near maximal* r *is a set with* $12!$ *components and* $\mathrm{Conf}(12, r)$ *just above radius* 1 *connects them. There must be a critical value above* $r = 1$.

Thank you for your attention!

wkusner.github.io

Supported by Austrian Science Fund (FWF) Project 5503