

Visualization of Abstract Algorithmic Ideas

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Abstract: Algorithm visualization has been high topic in CS education for years, but it did not make its way to university lecture halls as the main educational tool. The present paper identifies two key condition that an algorithm visualization must satisfy to be successful: general availability of used software, and visualization of *why* an algorithm solves the problem rather than *what* it is doing. One possible method of “why” algorithm visualization is using *algorithm invariants* rather than showing the data transformations only. Invariants are known in Program Correctness Theory and Software Verification and many researchers believe that knowledge of invariants is essentially equivalent to understanding the algorithm. Algorithm invariant visualizing leads to codes that are computationally very demanding, and powerful software tools require downloading/installing compilers and/or runtime machines, which limits the scope of users. One our important finding is that, due to computing power of the recent hardware, even very complex visualization involving 3D animation (e.g., Fortune’s algorithm, see Section 4) could be successfully implemented using interpreted graphic script languages like JavaScript that are available to every web user without any downloading/installation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Algorithm visualization (often called algorithm animation) uses dynamic graphics to visualize computation of a given algorithm.

First attempts to animate algorithms date to mid 80’s (Brown, 1988; Brown and Sedgewick, 1985), and the golden age of algorithm visualization was around the year 2000, when excellent software tools for a dynamic algorithm visualization (e.g., the language Java and its graphic libraries) and sufficiently powerful hardware were already available. It was expected that algorithm visualization would dramatically change the way algorithms are taught.

Many algorithm animations had appeared, mostly for simple problems like basic tree data structures and sorting. There were even attempts to automatize development of animated algorithms and algorithm visualization. Another direction was to develop tools that would allow students to prepare their own animations easily. Instead of giving particular references to algorithm animation papers, the reader is directed to a super-reference (Algoviz,) that brings a list of more than 700 authors, some of them even with 29 references in algorithm animation and visualization. There are also many web pages that offer algorithm animation systems, e.g., (Algoanim, ; Algomatic, ; DD2, ; AlgoLiang, ; VisuAlgo,).

However, algorithm visualization and animation has not fulfilled the hopes, and it is still not used too much in CS courses. One can even find articles with titles like “We work so hard and they don’t use it” (bassat Levy and Ben-Ari, 2007), complaining about low acceptance of algorithm animation tools by teachers. The number of articles, reports, and visualization tools sensibly declined in the second decade of the new millennium.

The present paper is an attempt to find why algorithm animation and visualization is used much less in instruction then we hoped 10 or 20 years ago.

We strongly believe that the reason is relative simple: An algorithm operates on some data (the input data, working variables, and the output data). Usually, in any particular field of Computer Science, there is a standard way of visualization of data - graphs and trees are drawn as circles connected by line segments, number sequences could be visualized as collections of vertical bars, there are standard ways of drawing matrices, vectors, real functions, etc. An algorithm animation is usually implemented by running the algorithm slowly or in steps, and simply modifying the visual representation of the data in the screen.

A person who knows and understands the algorithm in question can see how the algorithm progresses, but a novice user just see visual objects moving and changing their shapes and colors, but finding out

why the movie runs in that way is usually too difficult for him or her.

The solution that we offer is to visualize (not as much) *what* the algorithm is doing, but *why* it is working in the way it is working. In other words, our aim is to visualize an abstract algorithmic idea that is behind a particular computing method. We admit that the statement is rather vague. Moreover, we are not able to give any general methodology of visualizing abstract algorithmic ideas (and we guess that no such methodology exists). Nevertheless certain examples are given in an attempt to illustrate the approach.

As we argue below, understanding an algorithm is essentially equivalent to the knowledge of the invariant used to prove its partial correctness and termination. Since the notion of an algorithm invariant is less abstract and vague than the term “algorithmic idea”, we believe that “animation of algorithm invariants” is a better description of our work.

Let us note that typically a visual representation of an invariant is not a particular visual object, but certain organization or arrangement of the visual data.

If, e.g., each vertex v of a graph subjected to Dijkstra’s algorithm is labeled by a value $E(v)$, if vertices are classified as “processed” and “unprocessed”, and if processed vertices are black and the unprocessed ones are red, then the invariant

- if u is processed, and w is unprocessed, then $E(u) \leq E(w)$

can easily be visualized by moving each vertex v horizontally (i.e., keeping its y -coordinate unchanged) to a location in which its x -coordinate is proportional to $E(v)$. Let us note that this also means that vertices move during the computation, as their E -values change.

In such a case there is a clearly imaginable vertical line, dividing the screen to a left part containing processed vertices, and the right one populated by unprocessed vertices. The dividing vertical line can be explicitly drawn to make representation of the invariant more explicit. Alternatively, the background color could be different in the respective parts of the screen. See Fig. 1 (that shows slightly more complex situation).

2 WHY VISUALIZATION USING INVARIANTS

2.1 Algorithm Invariants

The notion of an algorithm invariant is used when proving program termination and correctness:

- **Termination:** Given a program P , and a statement ϕ , prove that if P gets input data verifying the statement ϕ , the computation halts after finite number of steps.
- **Partial Correctness:** Given a program P , and two statements ϕ and ψ , prove that if P gets input data verifying the statement ϕ , and if the computation halts after finite number of steps, the output data verify the statement ψ .

To prove termination, it is sufficient to have a function τ and a constant c such that, given input data verifying ϕ , the function τ is always non-negative and after any c consecutive steps of the algorithm it decreases by at least 1.

The standard method of solving the partial correctness problem is to find a statement Φ such that it implies ϕ at the beginning of the computation, Φ together with the halting condition of the program P imply ψ , and Φ remains valid throughout the *whole computation*. This is why Φ is usually called an *invariant* of the algorithm P .

Given an invariant Φ for the partial correctness proof, proving the initial and the final condition is usually simple. Proving that Φ is an invariant is a more complicated, but rather straightforward task: the code P is split to atomic loop-less segments, and for each segment one proves that if Φ is satisfied on the entry of the segment, then it remains valid when the segment is executed.

The main and principal problem of Program Correctness proving is to find an invariant. The halting problem implies that in certain cases such an invariant does not exist and its existence is algorithmically undecidable. Even if an invariant exists, it is not always clear how to find it.

The Program Correctness theory can be used as a theoretical background in Software Verification, but at least as important is a meta-theory over the Program Correctness. It is widely accepted by many researchers and teachers in Algorithm Design and Analysis that *knowing an invariant* of an algorithm is closely related (and some say equivalent) to *understanding* the algorithm:

If one knows why a given algorithm always halts, he or she usually knows some measure of “unexplored or unprocessed data”, and such a measure can be used as a termination counter.

Similarly, if one really understands *why* an algorithm works correctly, he or she also knows or is able to imagine the logical connections and relations among the data that are processed by the algorithm. In such a case, it is sufficient to write down a description of all such relations in a form of a (usually rather complex) statement Φ to get an invariant.

On the other hand, knowledge of a termination counter tells us (usually in a very straightforward way) how the algorithm moves toward the end of the computation. In some cases the function is fairly simple (e.g., the number of nodes processed by Dijkstra's shortest path algorithm), sometimes we have to construct rather complicated "potential functions" that measure progress of the computation, but in all cases the way how the termination counter is constructed gives us clear understanding why the algorithm eventually halts.

Similarly, an invariant is usually a generalization of the output data condition that shows how the solution is gradually constructed.

2.2 Simple Invariant Example

A very straightforward and simple example of a termination function and an invariant can be given in the case of Dijkstra's shortest path algorithm. There are many visualizations of Dijkstra's algorithm available in the web, e.g. (Makohon et al., 2016; DD1, ; DD2, ; DD3, ; DD4, ; DD5, ; DD6, ; DD11, ; DY1, ; DY2, ; DY3, ; DY4, ; DY5, ; DY6, ; DY7, ; DY8, ; DY9, ; DY10, ; DY11, ; DY12, ; DY13, ; DY14, ; DY15, ; DY16, ; DY17, ; DY18, ; DY19, ; DY20,), but no one of them tries to visualize the invariants of the algorithm.

Dijkstra's algorithm finds a shortest path from a given vertex v_0 of a non-negatively edge labeled oriented graph to all remaining vertices.

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R ← {v0}; U ← all remaining vertices; P ← ∅;
E(v0) ← 0; E(v) ← ∞ for remaining vertices;
while R ≠ ∅ do
    u ← the element of R minimizing E(u);
    relax all edges starting in u;
    move u from R to P;
end while;
    
```

Vertices of the sets U, R, P are called *unreached*, *reached* (but not yet fully processed), and *processed*. Relaxing an edge (u, v) means to perform the following operation:

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if E(v) = ∞ then move v from U to R;
E(v) = min(E(v), E(u) + L(u, v));
    
```

where $L(u, v)$ is the length (label) of the edge (u, v) .

The algorithm contains just one while loop, and the termination is given by the following statement: during each iteration of the loop, the (non-negative) size of $R \cup U$ decreases by one.

A path v_0, v_1, \dots, v_k is called *definitive*, if $v_0, v_1, \dots, v_{k-1} \in P$ ($v_k \in P$ is not required).

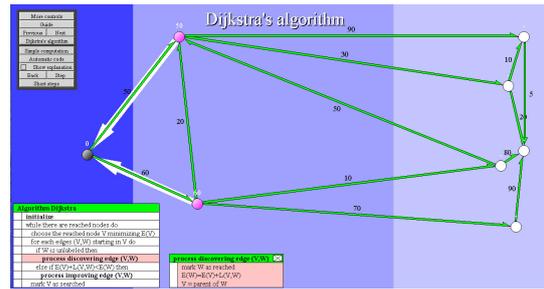


Figure 1: Dijkstra's shortest path algorithm visualization.

The partial correctness is proved using the following invariant (for details, see, e.g., (Cormen et al., 2001)):

- for any vertex v and in any moment of computation, $E(v)$ is the length of the shortest definitive path from v_0 to v .

The correctness proof of Dijkstra's algorithm also uses the following auxiliary invariant:

- $E(v) = \infty$ if and only if v is unreached, and if v is reached and w is processed, then $E(v) \geq E(w)$.

The main invariant implies immediately correctness of the algorithm: at the end, all nodes accessible from v_0 are processed, and hence all paths are definitive, and therefore $E(v)$ is the length of the shortest path to v .

As already mentioned above, the auxiliary invariant can easily be visualized if any vertex v moves horizontally during the animation so that the x -coordinate of its location is always proportional to $E(v)$. Such a visualization also makes it very easy to show the validity of the main invariant, because it makes it easy to see whether a given path is definitive. See Fig. 1, where the domains of vertex sets P, R, U are dark, less dark, and light, resp.

2.3 Invariant Visualization

If we accept the postulate that the algorithm understanding is equivalent to the knowledge of the algorithm invariant, we view educational algorithm visualization in a different light. The goal is not only to visualize the data and show them changing, but we have to arrange the data and possibly add some other visual objects to *visualize the invariant(s)*. Since it often happens that relatively similar algorithms have quite different invariants (e.g., the shortest path algorithms of Dijkstra and Bellman-Ford, see the next section), there is no general method of visualizing algorithm invariants, and any such animation is unique and incomparable with the others.

3 FURTHER INVARIANT VISUALIZATION EXAMPLES

3.1 Bellman-Ford Algorithm

Bellman-Ford (BF) shortest path algorithm is very similar to the method of Dijkstra mentioned in the previous subsection. It also searches for the shortest path from a given vertex v_0 to all other vertices. However, the termination proof of BF is much more difficult and completely different.

We say that a vertex v of the graph belongs to a layer k , if k is the number of edges of the shortest path from v_0 to v . (If there are more shortest paths to v , take the minimum of such k over all shortest paths.)

Similarly as Dijkstra's method, Bellman-Ford algorithm also computes an estimation $E(v)$ of the length of the optimal path to v . One who knows the BF algorithm understands that if v belongs to the layer k , $E(v)$ is equal to the length of the shortest path to v for the first time after k edge relaxations along the path. Therefore the computation can be divided into phases in such a way that during the k -th phase $E(v)$ receives the final value exactly for vertices that belong to the layer k .

Note that during the k -th phase, $E(v)$ can also change for vertices belonging to layers $\ell > k$, but the changed value will be changed again in later phases.

All this can easily be seen, if the way the graph is drawn in the screen is changed as follows: starting from the original locations of vertices, each vertex v moves horizontally so that its x -coordinate becomes equal to $\alpha k + \beta$, where α and β are two positive constants, and k is the index of the layer to which v belongs. In other words, all vertices of the same layer finish to belong to one vertical line, and layer indices increase left-to-right. It is advantageous to visualize layers better by embedding them into vertical stripe partition of the plane, see Fig. 3.

Note also that the partition of vertices to layers is known only after the computation is finished. Therefore the advantageous way of visualization of the BF computation is to run the algorithm first in the standard way, using the initial vertex locations. Not too much understanding is generated by the run. Then, using the tree of the shortest paths, vertices are arranged to vertical layers, and algorithm is restarted. Now, in 20/20 hindsight, students can clearly see what has really happened during the first run and why it has finished in the determined time.

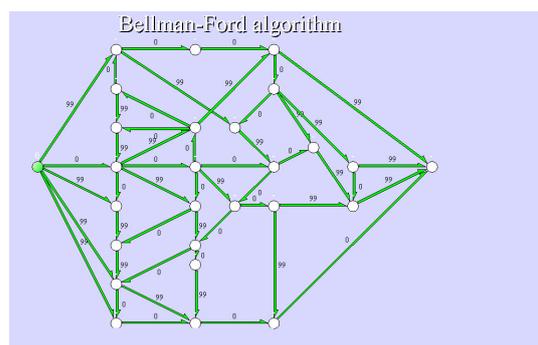


Figure 2: Bellman-Ford algorithm standard visualization.

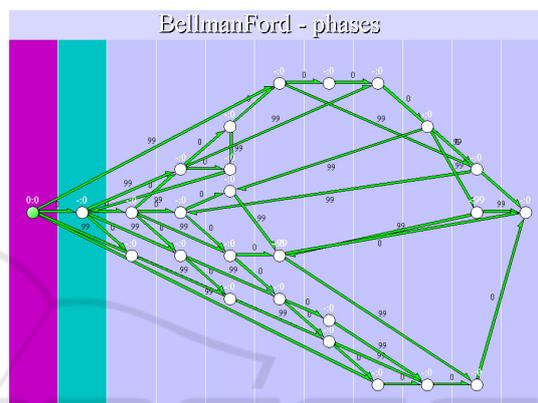


Figure 3: Bellman-Ford algorithm visualization with phases.

3.2 Binary Trees

Perhaps every one who is active in the field of algorithm animation has his or her own animation of Binary Search Tree (BST). The invariant of BST is very easy: when vertices of the tree are scanned left-to-right (i.e., searched in an in-order way), their labels form a non-decreasing sequence, see Fig. 4. However, only few existing visualizations of BST show this invariant. It might be argued that the BST operations are so easy that this is not necessary (but is it necessary to visualize such easy operations at all?)

It is more important to visualize advanced balanced trees, like AVL-trees and red-black trees. Most of such constructions are based on the *rotation* operation, see, e.g., (Cormen et al., 2001). It is very important to show that a rotation does not violate the invariant. This can advantageously be done by animating rotation in such a way that vertices move just vertically during rotation (see red arrows in Fig. 4), which means that the sequence of bars representing vertex labels does not change at all during a rotation - a rotation preserves the invariant.

Up to our best knowledge, this simple visual trick that clearly illustrates the principal idea of tree ba-

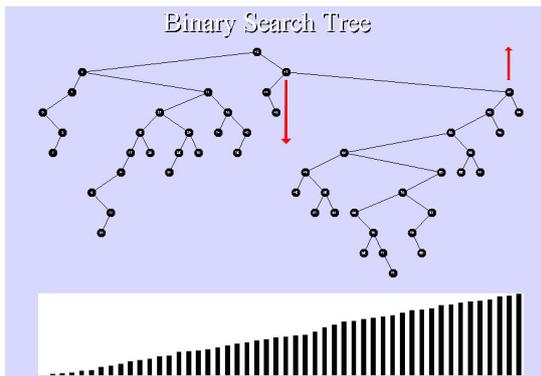


Figure 4: Binary search tree with vertex label bars.

lancing, which is the basis for all advanced tree data structures, has never been used in connection with tree data structure visualization.

4 ALGORITHMIC IDEA VISUALIZATION

Even though the example given in this section can also be understood as an algorithm invariant visualization, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak about algorithmic idea visualization (AIV). Once more, there is no general method of AIV, because the underlying ideas of different algorithms in different fields have nothing in common, and each idea is unique and requires unique method of representation by dynamic graphic means.

Well, in fact, there *is* one general method of AIV. Even though very little is known about creative mental process that leads to discovery of new algorithms, we believe (based on our introspection) that a researcher imagination is perhaps often based, as the word suggest, on mental images - and AIV is just a straightforward projection of such mental images to a display of a computer.

Due to the space restriction, we give just one example - Fortune's algorithm (Fortune, 1987) for Voronoi diagram in the plane. There are several animations of the algorithm in the web, see (Teller, 1993; F1, ; F2, ; F3, ; F4, ; F5, ; F6, ; F7,) - the reader is invited to look at them. It can be seen that the Voronoi diagram is eventually drawn, but the animations give absolutely no idea what the moving arcs mean and why and how they construct the diagram.

The algorithmic idea behind the method is following: imagine the plane containing sites are embedded as a horizontal plane into the 3-dimensional space. For each site, create a circular cone that has a vertical axis and uses the site as its apex. Observe the

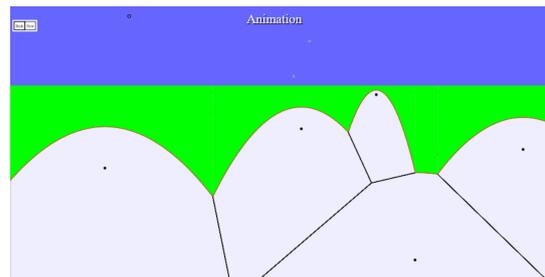


Figure 5: Fortune's algorithm - planar visualization.

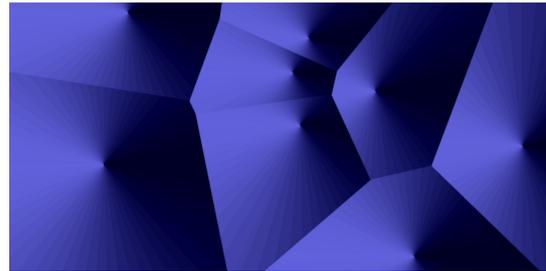


Figure 6: Fortune's algorithm - cones (vertical view).

cone surfaces vertically from the infinity (to avoid effects of perspective). The intersections of cones project to the site plane as the Voronoi diagram we are looking for. Moreover, if the "mountains" of the cones are swept by an inclined plane, the intersection of the plane with the visible parts of the cones appear as the arcs that are visible in the planar animations (Teller, 1993; F1, ; F2, ; F3, ; F4, ; F5, ; F6, ; F7,) and Fig. 5. We tried to show this in Figs. 5,6,7,8,9, but the reader is invited to look kindly to (Kučera,), where he or she can see a full visualization of the 3D situation.

5 SOFTWARE OF ALGORITHM VISUALIZATION

A dynamic visualization system for algorithm animation should satisfy the following conditions:

- **Animation speed** - the system should be able to present a good dynamic visualization.

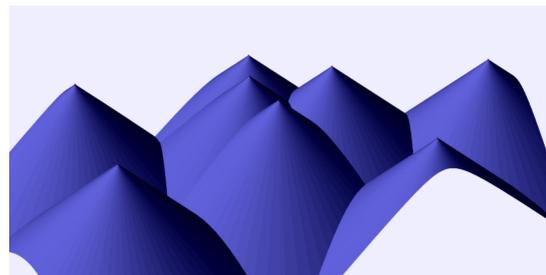


Figure 7: Fortune's algorithm - cones (general view).

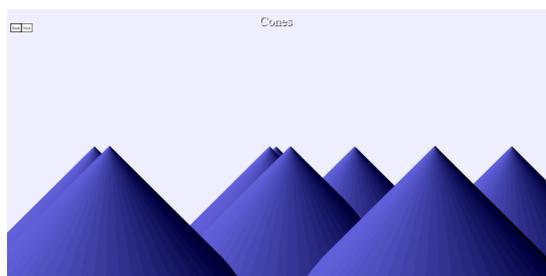


Figure 8: Fortune's algorithm - cones (horizontal view).

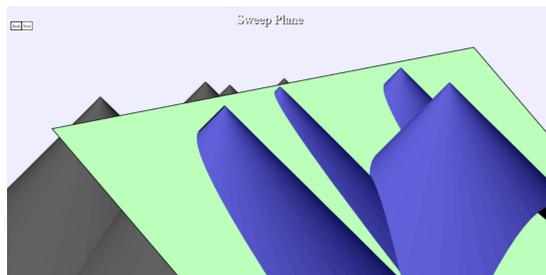


Figure 9: Fortune's algorithm - sweep plane.

- **Programming effort** - it should be easy to write a visualization code.
- **Widespread access** - it must be easy to run a visualization code without (much of) downloading and installing software.

Of course, the first condition is the principal one: in many cases, a visualization involves a continuous transformation of the displayed picture, and it might be computationally very demanding to deliver at least 20-25 frames per second to guarantee a smooth animation. A failure in this point would make the system useless.

Programming languages can be divided into three classes:

- **Compiled languages** - a code written by a programmer is compiled into the machine language and runs at the maximum possible speed. Examples are the languages C and C++ that also offer libraries of graphical functions (e.g., graphics.h).
- **Semi-compiled languages** - The code written by a programmer is transformed into a simpler code that is then interpreted by a special software. An example is Java - the intermediate code is interpreted by JVM program (Java Virtual Machine)
- **Interpreted languages** - the runtime system reads human written program instructions in runtime and interpret them. An example is JavaScript, see below.

There are really big differences in the speed among the above classes. While one simple in-

struction is often executed in just several machine clock ticks, if the same instruction is interpreted, the software must first read and parse the corresponding code, use tables to find the equivalent machine instruction, and only after that the instruction is executed. Interpreted languages are often several order of magnitude slower than compiled languages.

Typical animations that can be found in the web are quite simple and computationally almost trivial. Consequently, practically any system that allows dynamic animation can be used, preference is given to simple scripting languages.

However, a *why* visualization using algorithm invariant visualization or any other method of visual presentation of the underlying algorithmic idea, require sometimes computationally very demanding processing. E.g., the visualization of Fortune's algorithm involves a 3D representation of the scene that is composed of up to several tens of cone surfaces, each in turn composed of several hundred of triangles (in order to generate light effects). Moreover, user manipulation of the surface (rotation, changing between vertical, general, and horizontal view) as well as an animation of the plane sweep should be presented as a smooth movie, which means that the system must be able to deliver at least 20 frames per second. This would suggest that at least a semi-compiled graphical language should be used.

The bad news is that the first condition is in a strong conflict with the third condition of widespread access: a compiled code is always specific for a particular type of processors, and a very large number of compiled versions would be necessary to cover at least the majority of potential users. This is why the source code is usually distributed, and a user has to look for a compiler of the source language by himself or herself, learn how to use it etc., which strongly limits the scope of users that are able and willing to do such installation.

The good news is that the computing power of the recent processors is so many times higher than the real needs of most users (perhaps with the exception of gamers) that even quite slow interpreted languages are fast enough to deliver quite good and smooth animations.

Fortunately, algorithm visualizations for teaching purposes use small input sizes - graphs with up to several tens of nodes, matrices and vectors with few tens of rows only, etc. which makes using interpreted languages possible.

The present paper reflects our experience with an algorithm visualization system that has originally been written in Java - a high level semi-compiled and very powerful language. Unfortunately, Java appears

to be too powerful in some situation and very strict security measures are necessary if it is used as a web application, and those security measures make using Java much less comfortable now than it was 20 years ago. Moreover, Java Virtual Machine must be installed in a web browser or in a computer that would run visualizations off-line, and this, even if it is a relatively simple task, restricts the scope of users.

This is why we are moving the system from Java to JavaScript using the fact that the latter language is essentially ubiquitous - it is difficult to imagine a personal computer *without* a web browser (Chrome, Mozilla, Explorer, Opera, etc.), and all standard web browser come with a JavaScript interpreter (which is enabled by default). A user does not need to do more than to find the proper web page and perform 3 obvious clicks to open a selected visualization of our collection. In this way, our system is going to be available to literally any user of the web and requires no installation of any software (assuming that a browser is available).

At the present time we have moved the most computationally difficult item of our collection - visualization of Fortune's algorithm for finding a Voronoi diagram in the plane - from Java to JavaScript. The visualization of Fortune involves a very complex 3D visualization of a surface composed of a number of cones under light coming from the left. It is substantially more difficult than other 3D visualization of our collection. The application allows a user to rotate the surface in two directions and animate sweeping the surface by an inclined plane, and we have found that a JavaScript code is executed sufficiently fast even on smart-phones and tablets (which, fortunately, have smaller displays, which limits the size and complexity of the displayed scene).

The reviewer is kindly invited to play with the visualization of Fortune algorithm at the URL (Kučera,) to see that the speed of simulation might be limiting if the number of sites is too high, but it is quite sufficient for the standard educational use.

Thus, the first condition has a threshold nature - if the hardware is fast enough to compensate the interpreter slow-down for inputs of sizes typical for educational purposes, it is possible to forget it and concentrate on the third condition that can be fully satisfied by a graphical script language that is embedded into all standard web browsers.

There is still the second condition - how much programmer's time and effort is needed. The second condition is also in contradiction to the last one - simple interpreted script languages are designed for writing simple applications, but good algorithm visualization with educational value could be quite complex soft-

ware products of thousands code lines. It would be much more convenient to write such large codes in an object-oriented language with a strict type control (like Java and C++) that is supported by advanced development tools (like Eclipse and Net Beans). There are also extensions of script languages that bring at least a part of the comfort of more advanced systems.

However, we have found another tool that makes writing JavaScript algorithm visualizations relatively easy and fast - a strong programmer's discipline. An experienced programmer that is able to write natural and easy readable programs, does not need to be observed and directed by a development environment, and avoids seductions of 'easy' tricks of script languages, is not much less productive in JavaScript than, e.g., in Java. A benefit is a code that can be run by essentially each web user without any system installations.

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