

Section 6.3: Shortest Path and Minimal Spanning Tree

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Abstract

Several algorithms are described for tracing the shortest path between two nodes for a simple, positively weighted, connected graph. This is a simpler problem than the traveling salesman problem, and we might hope that a solution algorithm is available.

In addition, algorithms for finding a minimal spanning tree are also described, which are useful for trimming a graph to a subgraph which leaves all nodes connected, but eliminates “unnecessary” connections.

Notice that several of the algorithms we study in this section are actually found in the exercise portion of the section – you have to hunt for them!

I Shortest Path Algorithms

How might you find the shortest path between two nodes? Some suggestions might include

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- Examining all paths (exhaustive) and choosing the shortest;
 - Recursion.

We note that, if there are n nodes, you need at most a path of length $n - 1$.

It is relatively easy to come up with algorithms to solve this problem, but of course some ways are better than others. We’ll look at a couple of standard algorithms for carrying out this task.

1.1 Dijkstra's Algorithm

This algorithm was first described by Edsger W. Dijkstra¹. Here is a web-based example of the workings of the algorithm (where there is no stated destination node).

- Given two nodes x and y in a simple, connected, positively weighted graph. We seek the shortest path from x to y (assume a non-directed graph).
- Represent the graph by its adjacency matrix (with distances between non-adjacent nodes set to ∞) – meaning that they are non-adjacent.
- A *settled* node is one whose distance from x is known. Initially, the set of settled nodes is only $IN = \{x\}$.
- We grow IN by adding in the next nearest node to x via those already settled. When y falls into IN , we're done.

We keep track of two arrays, indexed by the nodes of graph G :

- an array d indexed by the nodes z , of distances of z to x ; and
- an array s indexed by the nodes z , of the node adjacent to a given node z on the shortest path from z to x (so far).

When y enters IN , we can use s to trace the shortest path.

Let's look at an example:

Exercise #3, p. 441

¹Dijkstra was the one responsible for the quote that “the quality of programmers is a decreasing function of the density of GO TO statements in the programs they produce.” (from a letter to the editor of *Communications of the ACM*, circa 1968)

1.2 Other shortest path algorithms

The Bellman-Ford Algorithm (`AnotherShortestPath`, p. 442) operates in a fashion similar to Dijkstra's algorithm, only it finds the shortest distance from x to every other node as described in the book (one could add a termination step, of course).

Each node keeps an eye on its adjacent nodes:

- if they don't change, no change in node
- if they change, reevaluate based on the weight of that arc.

Exercise #12, p. 443

Floyd's algorithm (the algorithm `AllPairsShortestPath`, p. 444) is simpler, and stupid, but has the advantage that it produces the shortest distance between any two nodes in the graph (however it does not produce the path itself). Sometimes this is desired, rather than the distance between any special pair. It too works with the adjacency matrix representation of the graph (modified to contain ∞ off the diagonal).

It simply uses brute force to compare direct paths between a pair and indirect paths between the same pair: we compare

$$A(i, k) + A(k, j)$$

to $A(i, j)$, to see if it's shorter to go from i to j via k .

Exercise #15, p. 444.

2 Minimal Spanning Trees

Definition: A **spanning tree** for a connected graph G is a non-rooted tree containing the nodes of the graph and a subset of the arcs of G . A **minimal spanning tree** is a spanning tree of least weight of a simple, weighted, connected graph G .

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
d	0	3	5	∞	8	1	∞	∞
s	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

$$IN = \{1\}$$

d	0	3	5	∞	7	1	7	∞
s	-	1	1	1	6	1	6	1

$$IN = \{1, 4\}$$

d	0	3	5	∞	7	1	4	∞
s	-	1	1	1	6	1	2	1

$$IN = \{1, 2, 6\}$$

d	0	3	5	∞	7	1	4	5
s	-	1	1	1	6	1	2	7

$$IN = \{1, 2, 6, 7\}$$

d	0	3	5	6	7	1	4	5
s	-	1	1	3	6	1	2	7

$$IN = \{1, 2, 6, 7, 3\}$$

d	0	3	5	6	6	1	4	5
s	-	1	1	3	8	1	2	7

$$IN = \{1, 2, 6, 7, 3, 8\}$$

5 is settled

5 ← 8 ← 7 ← 2 ← 1