

FACILITATING ALGORITHM VISUALIZATION CREATION AND ADOPTION IN EDUCATION

Doctoral Dissertation

Ville Karavirta

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Abstract The research question of this thesis is: <i>How can we develop algorithm animations (AA) and AA systems further to better facilitate the creation and adoption of AA in education?</i> The motivation for tackling this issue is that algorithm animation has not been widely used in teaching computer science. One of the main reasons for not taking full advantage of AA in teaching is the lack of time on behalf of the instructors. Furthermore, there is a shortage of ready-made, good quality algorithm visualizations. The main contributions are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Effortless Creation of Algorithm Animation. We define a Taxonomy of Effortless Creation of Algorithm Animations. In addition, we introduce a new approach for teachers to create animations by allowing effortless on-the-fly creation of algorithm animations by applying visual algorithm simulation through a simple user interface.• Proposed Standard for Algorithm Animation language. We define a Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages to help comparing the different AA languages. The taxonomy and work by an international working group is used to define a new algorithm animation language, eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language, XAAL.• Applications of XAAL in education. We provide two different processing approaches for using and producing XAAL animations with existing algorithm animation systems. In addition, we have a framework aiding in this integration as well as prototype implementations of the processes. Furthermore, we provide a novel solution to the problem of seamlessly integrating algorithm animations with hypertext. In our approach, the algorithm animation viewer is implemented purely with JavaScript and HTML. Finally, we introduce a processing model to easily produce lecture slides for a common presentation tool of XAAL animations.			
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Tiivistelmä Tämän työn tutkimuksen lähtökohtana oli tutkimuskysymys: <i>Miten algoritmivisualisaatioiden luomista ja käyttöönottoa opetuksessa voidaan helpottaa visualisaatioita ja niiden tuottamiseen käytettyjä välineitä kehittämällä?</i> Motivaationa tutkimukseen on, että algoritmianimaatio ei ole saavuttanut suurta suosiota opettajien keskuudessa. Pääsyy tähän on, että opettajilla ei ole tarpeeksi aikaa animaatioiden luomiseen. Lisäksi valmiista, korkealaatuista animaatioista on pulaa. Työn keskeiset tulokset ovat seuraavat: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Algoritmianimaatioiden vaivaton luonti. Ensin työssä tutkitaan miten animaatioiden tekemisestä saataisiin vähemmän vaivalloista. Tähän kysymykseen etsitään ratkaisua määrittämällä tapa mitata animaatiojärjestelmien vaivattomuutta. Lisäksi esitellään järjestelmä, MatrixPro, joka on vaivaton luentotyökalu opettajille.• Ehdotus standardiksi algoritmianimaatiokieleksi. Työkaluksi järjestelmien yhteisen algoritmianimaatiokielen kehittämiseen määrittelemme taksonomian algoritmianimaatiokielten arvioimiseen. Tätä taksonomiaa käytetään hyödyksi määriteltäessä laajennettava algoritmianimaatiokieli (XAAL, eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language). Kielen määrittelyssä käytetään hyväksi myös kansainvälisen työryhmän visiota yhteisestä algoritmianimaatiokielestä.• XAAL-kielen käyttö opetuksessa. Työssä esittelemme toteutuksen joukolle työkaluja, joka mahdollistaa XAAL-animaatioiden käytön ja luomisen algoritmianimaatiojärjestelmillä. Lisäksi esittelemme uuden tavan liittää animaatioita hyperdokumenteihin. Lopuksi esittelemme mallin tuottaa helposti luentokalvoja yleiselle esitystyökalulle XAAL-animaatioista.	
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Preface

“ A book like this is largely the work of one person. There’s no other single human being who’s spent as much time as I have thinking about it, perseverating over it, changing the same sentence back and forth between two different versions over and over. ”

– *Steve Krug, Don't make me think!*

While the above quote from Steve Krug is spot on, there are a number of people without who this thesis would never have been done. First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Lauri Malmi and instructor Docent Ari Korhonen for providing the facilities to do this work. Their input and feedback to the work during this process has been highly valuable. Ari was also the one who hired me as a research assistant back in 2002. This work has been done in the Software Visualization Group and Computer Science Education Research Group and I would like to thank all former, current, and future colleagues.

I am also grateful to the participants of the ITiCSE XML Working Group for the discussions and ideas during the intensive five-day spell in Portugal. I would especially want to thank Tom Naps and Guido Rößling for giving me the chance to be part of the group. Tom also read and gave insightful comments on an early draft.

Furthermore, I wish to thank my friends and family for the tremendous support over the years. My greatest gratitude goes to Linda for being special.

Finally, I would like to thank the pre-examiners Professor Scott Grissom and Professor Pierluigi Crescenzi for their comments to improve this work. And it is an honor to have Professor Susan Rodger as my opponent.

Otaniemi, 6.11.2009

Ville Karavirta

List of publications and the contributions of the author

This thesis consists of an introduction and the following publications [P1] - [P7]

[P1] Petri Ihantola, Ville Karavirta, Ari Korhonen, and Jussi Nikander. Taxonomy of effortless creation of algorithm visualizations. In *Proceedings of the 2005 International workshop on Computing Education Research (ICER)*, pages 123–133, New York, NY, USA, 2005.

This paper introduces a taxonomy of effortless creation of algorithm visualizations and evaluates some of the existing AV systems. All the authors of the paper contributed evenly on all parts of the paper.

[P2] Ville Karavirta, Ari Korhonen, Lauri Malmi, and Kimmo Stålnacke. MatrixPro - A tool for on-the-fly demonstration of data structures and algorithms. In *Proceedings of the Third Program Visualization Workshop (PVW)*, pages 26–33, The University of Warwick, UK, 2004.

In this paper, an algorithm animation system called MatrixPro is introduced. The system supports on-the-fly creation of animations using visual algorithm simulation. The work presented in this paper included significant constructive part. The author of this thesis implemented the system based on the Matrix algorithm simulation framework. The authors of the paper contributed evenly in writing of the paper, while the main contribution of Karavirta was in the section describing the system.

[P3] Ville Karavirta, Ari Korhonen, Lauri Malmi, and Thomas Naps. A Comprehensive Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages. *Journal of Visual Languages and Computing* (accepted).

This paper introduces a taxonomy of algorithm animation languages. In addition, there is an evaluation of several existing AA languages.

A first version of the taxonomy was presented in the Master's thesis of the author of this thesis. Karavirta, Korhonen, and Malmi published a polished version of the taxonomy in a conference paper. Finally, this paper was extended significantly to the current version by all the authors.

[P4] Thomas Naps, Guido Rößling, Peter Brusilovsky, John English, Duane Jarc, Ville Karavirta, Charles Leska, Myles McNally, Andrés Moreno, Rockford J. Ross, and Jaime Urquiza-Fuentes. Development of XML-based tools to support user interaction with algorithm visualization. *SIGCSE Bulletin*, 37(4):123–138, 2005.

This paper discusses requirements for a common algorithm animation language to be used by multiple AA systems. It gives examples and specifications for the different elements of AA. The author’s main contributions were in the specification of the graphical primitives and transformations on them, as well as the parts of the paper discussing them.

[P5] Ville Karavirta. Integrating algorithm visualization systems. In *Proceedings of the Fourth Program Visualization Workshop (PVW)*, volume 178 of *Electronic Notes in Theoretical Computer Science*, pages 79–87, 2007.

This paper describes a new algorithm animation language called Extensible Algorithm Animation Language, XAAL. In addition, the paper shows how XAAL can be used to transfer algorithm animations between AA systems. The work presented in this paper included significant constructive part. The author of this thesis is the sole author of this work.

[P6] Ville Karavirta. Seamless merging of hypertext and algorithm animation. *ACM Transactions on Computing Education*, 9(2):1–17, 2009.

This paper presents an algorithm animation viewer implemented purely using HTML and JavaScript making this solution suitable to be used in hypertext learning material due to the advanced interaction possibilities between learning material (HTML) and the animation. The work presented in this paper included significant constructive part. The author of this thesis is the sole author of this work.

[P7] Ville Karavirta, Guido Rößling, and Otto Seppälä. Automatic generation of algorithm animations for lecture slides. *TKK Technical Reports in Computer Science and Engineering, B*, TKK-CSE-B7, 2009.

In this paper, we present a process to easily generate algorithm animations in lecture slide format with an existing AV system. The work presented in this paper included significant constructive part.

Karavirta and Seppälä presented the initial idea of automatic lecture slide generation in a previous paper where both of the authors contributed equally. For this version, the author of this thesis implemented the XAAL language to ANIMAL with the help of Rößling, as well as the XAAL to Open Document Format transformation. The writing of the paper was done collaboratively among the authors.

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Part I

Introduction and Background

Chapter 1

Introduction

Due to the rapidly increased performance of computerized devices, software products have grown to be more and more complex. As a result, software developers need to understand very large parts of the software. At the same time, people are constantly required to be more efficient at whatever they do. To help software developers achieve this, various *Software Visualization* (SV) tools have been developed. Software Visualization can be defined as “*the visualization of artifacts related to software and its development process*” [32].

Many different areas of software engineering can apply and benefit from Software Visualization. Software developers can get insights on the class or package structures of an object-oriented software. UML diagrams are a good example of an often used visualization [99]. SV tools can also provide detailed information of the state of the program through visual debuggers. In addition, developers can test their software using *visual testing* [78]. On the other hand, algorithm developers and researchers can get a better view of the behaviour of algorithms through visualizations. In education, students can use visualizations to help them understand and learn new concepts in software development and algorithmics. Project managers can get an overview of the progress of a software project from visualizations of the software evolution.

In general, SV can be divided into visualizing the *structure*, *behaviour*, and *evolution* of software. Structure is the visualization of static parts and relations of the system. Behaviour is the visualization of the program execution with real or abstract data. Finally, evolution is the visualization of the development process of the software. [32]

Algorithm animation (AA)¹ is one form of visualization of behaviour where the goal is to visualize the execution of an algorithm [32]. The main purpose of algorithm animation development is aimed toward use in educational context. This is also the focus in this thesis, although the ideas can be applied to different areas of SV, as well.

1.1 The Problem and Research Questions

Algorithm animation has been used in education for a few decades with the goal of helping students to learn the difficult concepts of data structures and algorithms. In a survey by Naps et al. [95], most of the 93 respondents stated that they believe visualizations to help students learn computing concepts. Only five indicated neutral or no opinion while *none* disagreed with the helpful effect of visualizations.

Recent studies indicate that to be *educationally effective* (*i.e.* aid students' learning) algorithm visualizations cannot be merely passive animations, the users must interact with the animation [50, 95]. This discovery has led to the development of a wide variety of interactive visualization tools.

The confidence of teachers and the demonstrated learning benefits of animations have not helped AV to reach a wide audience. To the disappointment of the AV system developers, most of the AV tools have been used only in the institutions they were developed in. According to the survey by Naps et al. [95], the key reasons for not adopting AV are the following.

- Teachers do not have time to search for good examples.
- Teachers do not have time to learn the new tools.
- Teachers do not have time to develop visualizations.
- Teachers feel there is a lack of effective development tools.

Furthermore, there is a shortage of ready-made, good quality algorithm visualizations usable in teaching [125].

As the hope of the AV developer community is to get visualizations more widely into use among educators, the main research question we will tackle in this work is:

¹Another term widely used is Algorithm Visualization (AV). Some see this as a wider topic, but in this work, we will use both terms interchangeably to refer to the definition of Algorithm Animation.

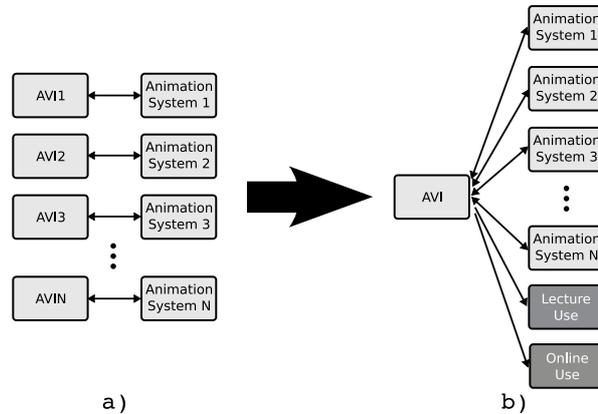


Figure 1.1: **a)** The current situation of AV systems where every system has its own format for describing the algorithm visualization information (AVI). **b)** The wanted situation where every system is using the same AVI format.

How can we develop algorithm animations and AA systems further to better facilitate the creation and adoption of AA in education?

As the main problems with disseminating the use of visualizations we see the large number of separate visualization applications and the lack of reuse of existing visualization. This is also partly the reason for the current shortage of good quality ready-made visualizations. The visualization applications provide different approaches to creating animations. In addition, for students using these animations, the systems provide different interaction methods. Each of these systems has its own internal format for storing the animations and the same visualization cannot be used in many systems (see Figure 1.1a). The reuse of created resources between applications is a natural requirement in many environments. For example, sharing presentation slides is common. A situation where all the presentation tools would only read/write their own format would make everyday usage more difficult. Thus, we will approach the research question by examining the description and usage of algorithm visualization information (AVI), that is, the information needed to visualize an algorithm. This takes four forms and divides the research to aim at answering four questions:

- **What is effortless creation of AVI?** As one of the main reasons for not using visualizations is the lack of effective tools, we will explore what

makes an algorithm animation system effortless. With this information, novel approaches to AV production can be introduced. The aim is, that although creating good examples will remain difficult, it should be difficult because of pedagogical considerations instead of the limitations of the available tools.

We will start by exploring what makes an algorithm animation system effortless and introduce a taxonomy of effortless creation of AV (Formulative-taxonomy, FT²). This was carried out by thoroughly analyzing responses on a survey to users of AV systems. We will also introduce a new approach for teachers to create algorithm visualization using visual algorithm simulation, thus allowing effortless use in a limited application area (Descriptive system, DS and Concept implementation, CI).

- **How to specify a system independent description of AVI?** The introduction of a system independent format to describe AVI would allow all the AV systems to use the same visualizations (see Figure 1.1b).

In the second part of this work, we will analyze the languages used by the existing AV systems to store the visualizations and aim at identifying the key features of algorithm animation languages (Review of literature, DR). We summarize the results of the analysis by introducing a taxonomy of algorithm animation languages (FT). This taxonomy together with the work of an international working group is used to specify a proposal for a standard algorithm animation language, XAAL (eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language) (Formative-standards, FG). Furthermore, we use the newly defined taxonomy to evaluate the XAAL language (Evaluative-other, EO).

- **How can we process the AVI to use in AA systems?** A survey by Bassil and Keller concluded that integration of SV tools and importing/exporting visualizations from SV tools are the main challenges for the future of SV tool builders [6]. Understandably, merely having a standard language for AVI is not enough. Thus, we need to provide processes that enable importing/exporting visualizations. Evidently, all the created visualizations would then be available for all the AV systems.

²For each part of this work, we will refer to the applied research approaches and methods in software engineering defined by Glass et al. [38].

For the proposed standard to be useful, we will introduce two different processes on how to add XAAL import/export to existing AV systems (Formulative-process, FP). In addition, we introduce a framework that implementing this in AV systems (Formulative-framework, FF).

- **How can we process the AVI for different learning situations?**

According to Rößling et al., merging visualizations into hypertext is an important step in allowing online learning and promoting the use of AV [119]. Our aim is to make this merging as seamless as possible for the students. Another learning situation (where AV is used) is lectures. Typically, this requires the teacher to switch between lecture slides and an AV system. Here, we aim at providing the teacher with the possibility to use the animations in the lecture slides, thus ensuring the coherency of the learning materials.

For the hypertext merging, we will first do a literature review on requirements of a visualization system (DR). Based on these requirements, we will introduce a proof of concept implementation of a seamless way to merge visualizations into hypertext (DS and CI). For the lecture use, we apply the XAAL framework to introduce an approach to use XAAL animations in lecture slides (DS and CI).

It has to be mentioned that this is a software engineering thesis, although the main application area is in education. So we are not as much considering the pedagogical aspects as we are interested in software to be used in education. Furthermore, this thesis incorporates a significant amount of constructive work. The applicability of the framework and the introduced integration approaches have been tested by proof of concept implementations with enough functionality to see that the ideas could be thoroughly implemented.

1.2 Main Contributions and Structure of this Thesis

The following points summarize the main contributions of this work as well as introduces the contents of the different parts of this thesis.

- **Part II: Effortless Creation of Algorithm Animation.** In Publication [P1], we define a Taxonomy of Effortless Creation of Algorithm Animations. This work is summarized in Chapter 4. In Publication [P2] (sum-

marized in Chapter 5), we introduce a new approach for teachers to create animations by allowing effortless on-the-fly creation of algorithm animations by applying visual algorithm simulation through a simple user interface.

- **Part III: Proposed Standard for Algorithm Animation language.** We define a Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages to help comparing the different AA languages (Publication [P3] and Chapter 7). The taxonomy and work by an international working group (Publication [P4] and Section 8.1) is used to define a new algorithm animation language, eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language, XAAL. XAAL is introduced in Publication [P5] and in Section 8.2.
- **Part IV: Applications of Xaal in education.** We provide two different processing approaches for using and producing XAAL animations with existing algorithm animation systems. In addition, we have a framework aiding in this integration as well as prototype implementations of the processes (Publication [P5] and Chapter 9). Furthermore, we provide a novel solution to the problem of seamlessly integrating algorithm animations with hypertext (Publication [P6] and Chapter 10). In our approach, the algorithm animation viewer is implemented purely with JavaScript and HTML. Moreover, we introduce a processing model to easily produce lecture slides for a common presentation tool from XAAL animations (Publication [P7] and Chapter 11).

Finally, Part V discusses and concludes the results of this thesis.

Chapter 2

Software Visualization

This chapter briefly defines the concepts used in the rest of this thesis. We start by defining the field of Information Visualization and proceed to Software Visualization (SV) and Algorithm Animation (AA). Furthermore, we discuss the different roles in the SV production process as well as taxonomies to characterize SV systems.

2.1 Information Visualization

Information visualization (IV) is “*the use of computer-supported, interactive, visual representations of abstract data*” [25]. The goal of IV is to amplify cognition, that is, aid the understanding of some aspects of the data. Without going into too much details about human perception, some of the reasons why visualizations can amplify cognition were explained by Larkin and Simon [73]:

- Visualizations group related information together, reducing the searching for needed elements.
- Visualizations use location to group information, reducing the required matching of symbolic labels.
- Visualizations support large number of perceptual inferences, which are easy for humans.

Information visualization can also be considered as an adjustable process of mapping data to visual views. This process can be modeled by the reference model of Figure 2.1 [25]. In the reference model, *raw data* is data typically in some domain specific format. By applying *data transformations* on the raw

data, relational descriptions in the form of *data tables* are achieved. Through *visual mappings*, these data tables are mapped to *visual structures*. Visual structures combine the spatial substrates, graphical primitives, and graphical properties. Finally, after *view transformations*, the *view* intended for a human observer is achieved. Throughout this thesis, this will be the underlying model when discussing the creation process of algorithm visualizations.

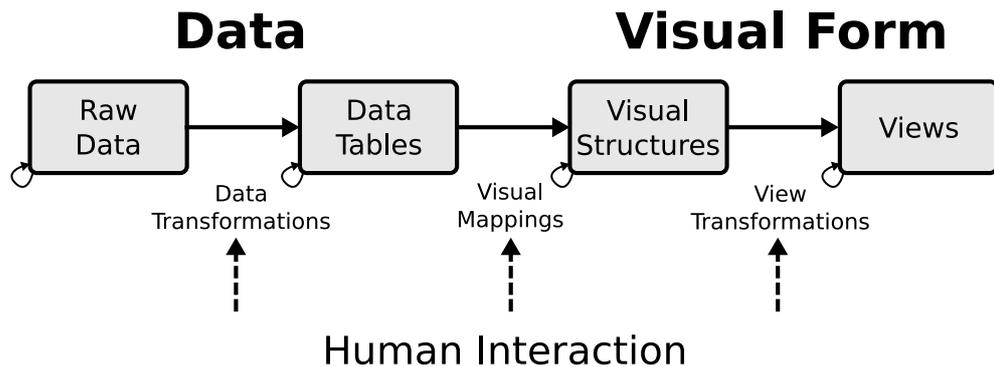


Figure 2.1: Information Visualization reference model [25].

To better convey the steps of the reference model, Figure 2.2 gives an example from the educational world. In the example, raw data is a pile of exams and assignment solutions done by students. This data can be transformed through a possibly laborious data transformation to a data table that contains the exam points, assignment points, and course grades of the students. The data table is useful when the teacher publishes the results for students. However, if the teacher wants to see how the final examination points correlate with the assignment points, a visual mapping to a scatter plot is useful. Finally, through view transformations, interaction can be added by adjusting the visualization to highlight students who got a certain grade from the course.

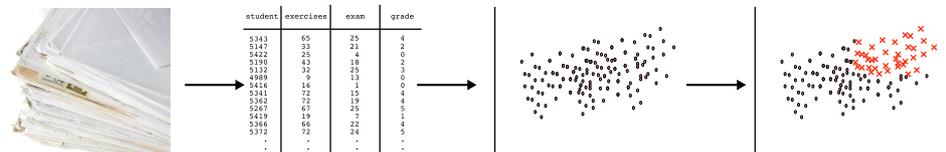


Figure 2.2: Example of the Information Visualization reference model. The process illustrated is from exams on paper \rightarrow exam and assignment points \rightarrow visualization of points \rightarrow visualization with points with certain grade highlighted.

2.2 Software Visualization and Algorithm Animation

Software Visualization can be defined as “*the visualization of artifacts related to software and its development process*” [32]. As mentioned earlier, SV can be divided in visualizing the *structure*, *behaviour*, and *evolution* of software [32]:

- Structure is the visualization of static parts and relations of the system. The information visualized is available by statically analyzing the source code without executing it. Examples of structure visualization are pretty printing, control flow graphs, and UML class diagrams, just to mention a few.
- Behaviour is the visualization of the program execution with real or abstract data. Topics of behaviour visualization are dynamic architecture visualization, algorithm animation, visual debugging, and visual testing. Of these, algorithm animation is of special interest in this thesis. In algorithm animation, the goal is to visualize the behaviour of an algorithm as opposed to Program Visualization (PV) where the aim is to visualize the implementation details.
- Evolution is the visualization of the development process of the software. Evolution visualization can be, for example, visualizing software metrics changes, visualizing structural changes, or visualizing software archives such as CVS or Subversion.

Maletic et al. [79] discuss the information visualization reference model in the context of software visualization. In SV, the raw data is source code, documentation, execution trace, and so on. Data tables can be abstract syntax trees, dependency graphs, or class/objects relationships. Visual structures are the visualizations specific to some visualization software.

Algorithm animation can also be mapped to the reference model of Figure 2.1. An example is shown in Figure 2.3. Typically, the raw data is the source code (which can be pseudo code) of an algorithm. From this, the data (tables) are constructed using some AV system. The data tables are in the form of an *algorithm visualization information* (AVI), which we define as the information needed to visualize an algorithm by some AV system. AVI can be, for example, in the form of text, images, or video. An *algorithm visualization system* is a tool capable of creating and interpreting an AVI and mapping it to

visual structures. The system can be interacted with to form the view. This is only one possible way for the algorithm animation process to work, and the actual model depends heavily on the animation specification approach of the AA system. Thus, the way the mappings are specified and what the AVI looks like will be discussed more in the following chapters.

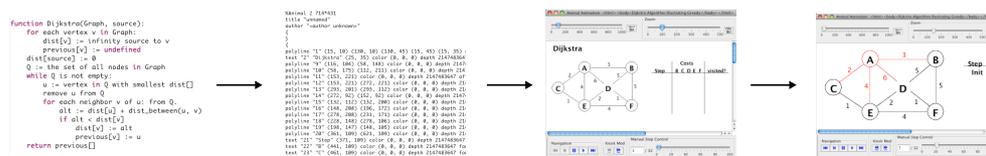


Figure 2.3: Example of algorithm animation in the Information Visualization reference model. The process illustrated is from pseudo code of an algorithm \rightarrow animation as ANIMALSCRIPT [113] \rightarrow visualization in ANIMAL [114] \rightarrow zoomed visualization playing in ANIMAL.

The software visualization community has not agreed upon one definition for the field. The most common of the other definitions is by Price et al. [102] who have defined software visualization as “*the use of the crafts of typography, graphic design, animation, and cinematography with modern human-computer interaction technology to facilitate both the human understanding and effective use of computer software.*” They divided SV into two separate fields: *algorithm visualization* and *program visualization*. Program visualization is the use of visualization to enhance the human understanding of computer programs. Algorithm visualization (AV) is the visualization of a high-level representation of a piece of code. They further divided AV into *static algorithm visualization* and *algorithm animation* (AA). Algorithm animation is a dynamic algorithm visualization. The dynamic behavior can range from a series of static pictures to an animation requiring interaction from the user. The problem with this disjoint division of SV is that the line between algorithm visualization and program visualization has become fuzzy – PV systems include AV functionality and vice versa.

2.2.1 Roles in Software Visualization

The four different *roles* of persons who take advantage of software visualization have been introduced by Price et al [102]. *Programmer* is a person who develops the algorithm or program – the raw data of the reference model of

Figure 2.1 – without considering whether or not it is (going to be) visualized. *SV software developer* is a person who designs and implements software for SV. This software typically handles transforming the raw data to data (tables) and mapping them to visual structures. A person creating the visualization is called *visualizer*. Ideally, a visualizer configures how the SV software does the transformation and mapping using the existing features implemented by the SV software developer. Finally, the person using the visualization is addressed as *user*. The user interacts with the view transformations. In practice, these roles are often overlapping and it is common that, for example, the SV software developer is also a visualizer and a programmer.

In this thesis, the main focus is on the educational use of SV. Thus, the persons involved are student and instructor. When considering the roles in SV, the usual case is that student is the user and instructor has the rest of the roles. However, for example, in a situation where the students are required to create their own visualizations, the student is in the role of visualizer. In this thesis, we will use the terms student and instructor and indicate which of the SV roles we are discussing, unless it is clear from the context.

Until recently, the instructor has often been in the role of the developer. This stems from the fact that many of the visualization systems are not widely used outside the original university where they were developed. Usually, system development is a task that requires a lot of effort and understanding of the underlying system. Thus, to gain wider audience, SV systems need to allow the instructor to be able to work only in the roles of programmer and visualizer.

When considering the student using the visualization, research has shown that passively viewing algorithm animations does not have a significant effect on learning outcomes [50]. Therefore, *engagement* (activity) by the student is needed for a tool to be pedagogically useful. The different *levels* of engagement according to the engagement taxonomy [95] are *viewing*, *responding*, *changing*, *constructing*, and *presenting*. Viewing is passive watching of an animation where student only controls the visualization's execution. In responding, the student is engaged by asking questions about the visualization. Changing requires the student to modify the visualization, for example, by changing the input data. In constructing, the student is required to construct his/her own algorithm animation. At the highest level, presenting, the student presents

a visualization for an audience. Engagement will be discussed more in Section 3.2.5.

2.2.2 Algorithm Animation Language

Throughout this thesis we will talk about *algorithm animation languages* (AAL, or simply language). With this term we mean a textual representation describing an algorithm animation or visualization. The language should have a well-defined set of concepts, syntax, and semantics defined in the *language specification*. An algorithm animation language is one type of algorithm visualization information. Thus, in the reference model of Figure 2.1, an algorithm animation language is a way to store the data (tables).

2.3 Taxonomies of Software Visualization Systems

It is difficult to choose a proper tool for software visualization from the vast amount of different SV tools supporting different features, target scope, and interaction techniques. The best suitable tool depends heavily on the type of the task. To help this process, taxonomies characterizing SV tools have been defined [11, 68, 79, 84, 85, 102, 107, 134]. In the following, we will briefly introduce these taxonomies. However, we suggest the interested reader to read the cited articles to get a deeper understanding of the taxonomies.

One of the most well-known ways to categorize and evaluate Software Visualization systems is the *Taxonomy of Software Visualization* by Price et al. [102]. The taxonomy defines a structure of characteristics of SV systems that consists of six categories. These categories and the questions they should answer are the following.

- Scope — “*What is the range of programs that the SV system may take as input for visualization?*”
- Content — “*What subset of information about the software is visualized by the SV system?*”
- Form — “*What are the characteristics of the output of the system (the visualization)?*”
- Method — “*How is the visualization specified?*”

- Interaction — “How does the user of the SV system interact with and control it?”
- Effectiveness — “How well does the system communicate information to the user?”

The classification scheme by Myers [84] concentrates on program visualization systems. The taxonomy has two dimensions: the *program aspect* (is code or data illustrated) and the *display style* (static or dynamic visualization). In a later version of the taxonomy [85], a third level, algorithm, was added to the program aspect.

Brown [11] introduced a taxonomy which had three dimensions: *content*, *persistence*, and *transformation*. Content ranges from direct representation of code or data in the program to synthetic images showing information gathered not directly from the code. Persistence ranges from display of the current state only to displays showing the complete history of the information. Transformation ranges from discrete changes to incremental continuous changes.

Roman and Cox [107] have five categories: *scope* (answers the question What aspect of the program is visualized?), *abstraction* (What kind of information is conveyed by the visualization?), *specification method* (What mechanisms does the animator use to construct the visualization?), *interface* (What facilities does the system provide for the visual presentation of information?), and *presentation* (How does the system convey information?).

Stasko and Patterson [134] introduced a model with four characteristics: *aspect*, *abstractness*, *animation*, and *automation*. Aspect is the aspect of the program that is visualized, for example, program code or data structures. Abstractness is the level of abstraction of the visualization. Animation refers to whether or not the system supports animation in the strict sense that the authors specify. Automation characterizes the level of automation provided for the visualizer.

Kraemer and Stasko [68] presented a characterization on two levels: visualization *task being performed* and the *purpose* of the visualization. Another task oriented framework was introduced by Maletic et al. [79]. Although the framework is developed from the point of view of large-scale software systems, it can be applied to algorithm animation as well. The categories and the questions they aim at answering are the following.

- Tasks — *Why is the visualization needed?*
- Audience — *Who will use the visualization?*
- Target — *What is the data source to represent?*
- Representation — *How To represent it?*
- Medium — *Where to represent the visualization?*

As can be seen, the taxonomies have quite similar categories with slight differences in the terminology and the highlighted characteristics. Only the frameworks by Kraemer and Stasko and Maletic et al. are significantly different. In the end, the choice of a taxonomy depends on the needs. For example, the taxonomy by Myers provides a simple way to classify the systems, whereas the taxonomy by Price et al. offers a comprehensive way to analyze systems.

Chapter 3

Algorithm Animation

This chapter will introduce history of algorithm animation, as well as relevant research questions in the evolution of AA. We will conclude the chapter with a discussion on teachers and visualizations.

3.1 History of Algorithm Animation

The research on algorithm animation is often considered to have begun from the Sorting out Sorting video [3] by Ronald M. Baecker in 1981. It was a 30 minutes long video animating the behavior of nine different sorting algorithms. However, the first algorithm animations we are aware of were created in 1966 by Ken Knowlton, who made a movie about list processing using the L^6 programming language [64]. More of the early work was done by Hopgood who presented a set of films on hash tables in 1974 [44]. In 1975, Baecker presented two systems that made it *“possible for an instructor to produce short quick-and-dirty single-concept film clips with only hours of effort”* [2].

The field has evolved a lot since the first videos and systems were introduced. The first well-known computerized system was BALSAs (Brown Algorithm Simulator and Animator) [16]. BALSAs is an interactive algorithm animation framework that has a support for multiple dynamic views of an algorithm and the data structures associated to it. It introduced the *interesting events* paradigm where algorithm code was annotated at interesting points by calling a separate animator. Another recognized system of the early years of algorithm animation is TANGO (Transition-based ANimation Gener-

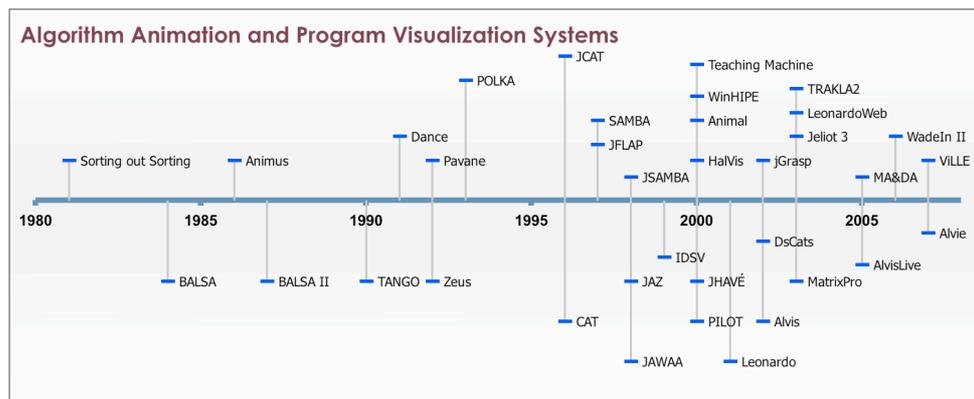


Figure 3.1: History of some Algorithm Animation and Program Visualization Systems. The vertical positioning is merely for improving readability.

atiOn) [129]. It is an AA system that introduced the *path-transition paradigm* and supported *smooth animation*, a feature first included in Animus [33]. Color and sound were first used by Zeus [13]. Another of the significant features was 3D graphics, first used in POLKA-3D [135] and Zeus3D [14].

Since the early days, numerous algorithm animation systems have been developed (see, *e.g.*, [1, 15, 24, 49, 58, 69, 83, 92, 114, 128]). Figure 3.1 shows a timeline of the various AA systems. Plenty more systems exist, but the contributions of the selected systems will be briefly mentioned in this chapter.

3.2 Research Questions in Algorithm Animation

This section will briefly introduce the key knowledge about developing and using algorithm animation systems acquired over the few decades. Naturally, it is not possible to go through all research, and we will thus focus on the most important topics relevant to our research goals. The rationale for these questions is that to cover a wide range of topics, we have chosen one question for each category of the Taxonomy of Software Visualization by Price et al. [102]. In our opinion, these questions highlight the relevant current and existing research in the field.

3.2.1 Scope: What Platform Should be used?

In the past, selecting an algorithm animation system could depend on the platform the system used. This was illustrated as one subcategory in the Taxonomy of Software Visualization.

Earlier systems were often targeted on some specific platform(s). For example, POLKA used C++ and X window system [133], POLKA-3D Silicon Graphics GL [133], HalVis [41] was implemented using Asymmetrix Toolbook, which was for Microsoft Windows 3.0, and Alvis [49] and AlvisLive [48] using .NET.

The current situation is that a system needs to be *platform independent* to be used [109]. This had led to the uprising of a multitude of Java-based systems, such as ANIMAL [114], JAWAA [1], JAZ [9], MatrixPro, Jeliot 3 [83], ViLLE [103], and so on. Thus, the advice for system developers nowadays is to use Java or open web standards like HTML and JavaScript [117] and to integrate them with hypertext. Technologies capable of this will be discussed in the following.

Java Applets Early work on algorithm visualization in hypertext has been done by Ross and Grinder [109]. In their hypertextbooks, the inclusion of visualizations is done using Java applets. This is currently a common way used in, for example, WinHIPE [137], JAWAA [1], LeonardoWeb [10], ViLLE [104], and TRAKLA2 [80]. In addition, there is a multitude of topic-specific animations implemented as applets.

There are some problems in using applets. First of all, they require a plugin to be installed. Luckily, this is already installed on almost all computers. In addition, the permissions of applets are limited, unless signed and trusted by the user. A minor usability issue is the slow startup of the Java plugin and thus the visualization. When integrating with HTML, the biggest problem is that communication between HTML and the applet is difficult at best. For example, updating information (such as points gained by a student) in the HTML, based on user actions in the applet, cannot be done reliably. This is a problem, for example, in TRAKLA2, which has been worked around by showing the updated points in the applet until the HTML page is refreshed by the user.

Java Web Start Visualization systems using Java Web Start include ANIMAL [114], Jeliot 3 [83], JHAVÉ [92], and MatrixPro [58]. Of these, Jeliot 3 and ANIMAL have been integrated with Moodle, which is a popular learning environment [82, 122].

In principle, Web Start applications are similar to applets, but they are launched through a link or a button instead of embedding into a web page. As with applets, communication between HTML and visualization is almost impossible. For example, dynamic documentation in browser that is changed based on the state of the visualization is difficult to achieve. To solve this, for example, JHAVÉ includes documentation within Java. Although this solution works, real browsers are better at rendering HTML than Java. The main advantage of Web Start is that the same tool can be used as a traditional application.

(Other) Rich Internet Application Technologies Several rich internet application (RIA) technologies have been introduced lately. These technologies allow creating complex applications that run in web browsers. For an overview, best practices, and comparisons of technologies, see [98]. One of the most prominent technologies is JavaScript. A multitude of JavaScript libraries aiding in web development have been developed, and new ones are popping up constantly. Some of the most well-known libraries include Dojo¹, Prototype², Scriptaculous³, jQuery⁴, and YUI⁵, just to mention a few. In algorithm animation, JavaScript has been used in WinHIPE to change images on a web page and thus allowing viewing of animations [89].

When building rich internet applications, JavaScript is not the only choice. In fact, the Java based technologies can be considered as RIA technologies. In addition, there is an increasing number of promising technologies available. The most potential candidates include Adobe Flash and Flex⁶, Microsoft Silverlight⁷, and Sun Microsystems JavaFX⁸.

¹<http://www.dojotoolkit.org/>

²<http://prototypejs.org/>

³<http://script.aculo.us/>

⁴<http://jquery.com/>

⁵<http://developer.yahoo.com/yui/>

⁶<http://www.adobe.com/products/flex/>

⁷<http://silverlight.net/>

⁸<http://www.javafx.com/>

Adobe's Flash and Flex provide technology for building cross-platform RIAs. Flash is used to visualize sorting algorithms in the Flash version of *Sorting out Sorting* by [37]. The tools for developing applications are quite sophisticated and powerful. However, the tools are commercial software products developed by Adobe. Another rising technology is Microsoft Silverlight, which uses many of the same technologies as the .NET framework making it suitable for developers familiar with .NET. However, Silverlight is not cross-platform compatible. Finally, we mention JavaFX, a family of products from Sun Microsystems based on Java technology. However, this technology is not ready for production use at the moment. On a positive side, Sun plans on releasing parts of the JavaFX family as open source. It should also be mentioned that, in the end, JavaFX applications are included in hypertext as Java applets.

In general, the newer RIA technologies have not been much utilized in algorithm animation. Thus, they have potential for future research and more creative solutions.

Other Technologies There are also other methods used to incorporate AA into hypertext. Ross's original hypertextbooks included videos [109]. According to current knowledge, the problem with videos is that they provide almost no interaction between the user and the visualization. Despite this, screen-casting, that is, capture of actions on a computer screen often with audio explanation [51], is becoming more and more popular on the web. However, we are not aware of using screencasting to replace algorithm animations.

3.2.2 Content: What is visualized?

In the taxonomy of Price et al., the subcategories of Content measured things like support for visualization of program and algorithm. Although algorithm animation has typically focused on visualizing the data in the algorithm, lately the visualization of both code and data has become increasingly popular.

Code visualization is a mapping between the changes in the code and the visualization of the data. Code visualization can be done in various ways, for example, by highlighting single code lines or showing several codes of the same algorithm on different abstraction levels [17]. In addition to highlighting the

current line, the code visualization can show things such as executed lines of codes (distinguished from the ones not executed) and the lines executed just before the current line [67]. More and more AV systems nowadays include pseudocode like presentation of the algorithm and highlight the current line of code. The inclusion of pseudocode has in fact been found to guide students to spend more time with the visualization [123].

In algorithm animation, the lower extreme of data being visualized is a system that uses only graphical primitives to describe the data structures. An example of such a system is SAMBA [131]. The other extreme is a system that visualizes only high level data structures, like, for example, Matrix-Pro [58]. These different approaches have both benefits and drawbacks. By using graphical primitives, the system can visualize almost any kind of structures, but the creation of such animations can require quite a lot of effort. On the other hand, systems using data structures can provide an effortless way to create the animation, but are typically limited to the set of structures supported by the system.

Animations often include other elements besides code and data structures. In *explanatory visualization*, the idea is to include an explanation in every step of the visualization [19]. Blumenkrants et al. take this even further by introducing *narrative visualizations* where AVs are created as stories with a plot [8]. In addition, their visualizations include voice narration.

Typically, AVs have been constructed with the mindset that the same visualization is suitable for all users. Adaptivity has been long used, for example, in adaptive hypermedia [20]. In *adaptive visualization*, the basic idea is to adapt the visualization content to the users profile [22]. Adaptive visualization has been used, for example, in WADEIn II together with explanations [22]. Loboda et al. have also presented a distributed framework for adaptive explanatory visualization [77].

3.2.3 Form: How to integrate the use of animations to teaching?

In the original taxonomy, Medium was one subcategory of Form that focused on the target medium of the system. Here, we take a broader point of view and consider the different ways to integrate animations into teaching and the medium used. Hundhausen et al. presented a taxonomy of scenarios of AV use

in education identifying the following scenarios: lectures, study, assignments, class discussion, labs, office hours, and tests [50].

In most use scenarios, studies researching the effect of visualizations on learning have been carried out. Many of these studies will be introduced in Section 3.2.6. Naps et al. state that few teachers tightly integrate visualizations with other parts of their courses [95]. Lahtinen suggests that to get students use visualizations, all course material and learning situations – course website, printed materials, assignments, and lecture slides – should point the students to visualizations of the topic [71]. Furthermore, Kehoe et al. hypothesize that animations are pedagogically more valuable when used *“in open, interactive learning situations [...] than in closed exam-style situations”* [61].

Crescenzi and Nocentini have integrated visualizations into a traditional textbook [29]. The textbook they use [28] contains descriptions of the algorithms, analyzes them, and points the readers to the visualizations presented using ALVIE system. In addition to the textbook, visualizations are used on all the engagement levels (see Section 3.2.5) on their CS2 course. Another system that comes with examples for a textbook [31] is LeonardoWeb [10]. Finally, the JFLAP system [7] has a supporting book that goes through the concepts of automata theory using JFLAP [106].

A report of an international working group proposed enhancements to general learning management systems (LMS) to better support computer science. One of their scenarios is integration of visualizations and visualization systems into an LMS [117]. For visualization system developers, the report suggests to use Java or open web standards like HTML and JavaScript. An earlier similar report focused only on how to merge visualizations and hypertext to add pedagogical value for both students and teachers [119]. Thus, web can be seen as the main target medium for visualizations. Technologies for developing for the web were discussed in Section 3.2.1.

3.2.4 Method: How the animation is generated?

In the taxonomy by Price et al., Visualization Specification Style describes the way visualizations are specified. In the original taxonomy, this was measured using terms like *hand-coded*, *library*, and *automatic*. However, since the taxonomy was introduced, many different visualization specification styles have

emerged. Thus the list above is out-dated and we will introduce an alternative categorization in the following. The list is loosely based on [110]. It should be noted, that many of the current systems include several of the techniques.

Topic-Specific Animation Topic-specific animations are, as the name suggests, built specifically for some topic. Usually these are stand-alone animations instead of algorithm animation systems. For example, the software packages by Khuri and Hsu concentrate on image compression algorithms [63], EVEGA [62] and IAPPGA [144] concentrate on graph algorithms, and GASP-II on geometric algorithms [126]. Not much can be said about this approach in the context of the visualization reference model introduced in the previous chapter, since the form of the animation data depends completely on the way the animation is implemented.

Direct Manipulation In direct manipulation [127], the animation is specified by manipulating graphical objects. In the context of the reference model, the mappings from raw data to data rows and to visual structures is done through creating and manipulating graphical objects. The raw data in this case can be, for example, a pseudo code of an algorithm in a book or merely a mental model of the visualizer. The concept of direct manipulation was first introduced in Dance [130]. Examples of other AA systems using direct manipulation are ANIMAL [114], JAWAA editor [1, 101], and ALVIS [49].

Visual algorithm simulation [65] takes direct manipulation one step further by allowing the animation to be specified by manipulating concrete data structures through visualizations. In visual algorithm simulation, data structures can be thought as data rows. The mapping to visual structures is done automatically, and the data rows can be modified by manipulating the visual structures. Animation systems using visual algorithm simulation include MatrixPro [58] and MA&DA [69].

API-based Generation In API-based generation, the animations are generated through method invocations of an application programmer's interface (API). The method invocations are typically included when something interesting happens, thus this approach is often called the *interesting events* paradigm. The raw data in this case is the program making the API calls.

These calls create the data rows, which are then used to create the visual structures.

The first system using API-based generation was BALSAs [16] followed by Zeus [12] and TANGO [129]. Later systems using this approach include JCAT [15, 90], JHAVÉ's API to generate GaigsXML [81, 91], and ANIMAL's API [118].

Scripting-based Generation In scripting-based generation, the animations are described using some intermediate format, usually a textual format. Commands using this format are then outputted from the execution of the visualized algorithm. Thus, the implementation of the algorithm is the raw data and the transformations to data tables are specified by the output of commands. SAMBA [131] was the first system to introduce the scripting-based generation. Examples of other systems offering scripting-based generation are ALVIE [29], ANIMAL [113], JHAVÉ [92], JAWAA [1], and JSAMBA [128]. Often, API-based generation is used to create scripts, thus offering an alternative, often more convenient way to use scripting-based generation.

Declarative Visualization Declarative visualization specifies the visualization by declaring mappings between a program state and a graphical representation. This is done by using mathematical expressions. Examples of this approach are Pavane [108] and the ALPHA language [30] used in the Leonardo system [27]. For example, in Pavane the mapping is defined as several simple mappings, each mapping being a collection of rules. These rules describe logical relationship between the input and output spaces: $v : Q(v) \Rightarrow P(v)$.

Code Interpretation Code interpretation is also a popular style due to its effortlessness. In this approach, the visualizations are automatically generated from a program code (raw data). Systems using code interpretation are typically visual debuggers or program visualization tools. Examples of such systems include Jeliot 3 [83] and jGrasp [42, 52] that automatically visualize Java programs. ViLLE [103, 104] allows automatic creation of visualizations in multiple languages from simple Java programs. WinHIPE [100, 139] allows automatic creation of visualization from a functional programming language.

This topic of visualization specification styles is relevant for the implementa-

tion strategies of adding system independent AVI support to existing systems. In discussion in Chapter 12, we will consider how these different approaches fit to the idea of data exchange among systems.

3.2.5 Interaction: How to make animations interactive?

In the taxonomy of Price et al., temporal control, speed, and direction had their own subcategories, but the support for them in the analyzed systems was rare. However, today all these are seen as requirements for AV systems [120, 121] and are included in most systems. There is even a design pattern for how to implement reverse execution [111]. Still, AV system developers have strived to make visualizations more interactive, especially since the *Engagement taxonomy* [95] was introduced by an ITiCSE Working Group in 2002. It has gained almost a standard like recognition in the field. The taxonomy defined the different *levels* of engagement as the following.

No viewing is the lowest level on the taxonomy. On this level, no visualization is used.

Viewing is the core level of engagement. It is passive watching of an animation. However, the student can have controls to move backward/forward in the visualization, change the speed, etc. It should be noted, that viewing is included in all of the higher levels of engagement and is supported by all visualization systems.

Responding adds engagement by asking the student questions about the visualization. The question can be, for example, “What will happen in the next step of the algorithm?”. The main idea is that students use the visualization to find the answer for the questions.

Responding has been used in many visualization systems. The first we are aware of is IDSV [54] in 1999. IDSV engaged students in different ways by requiring, for example, them to click the node visited next in a tree traversal algorithm. Other systems supporting responding include JHAVÉ [92, 93], ViLLE [103], Teaching Machine [18], and ANIMAL [114]. In ANIMAL, the support for popup questions is achieved by an extension which offers tool independent support for responding [116]. This extension has been used also in Jeliot 3 [86] and an extension to TRAKLA2 [56].

Changing requires the student to modify the visualization. This can be, for example, changing the input data of the algorithm allowing the student to explore the algorithm's behavior in different situations.

AV systems supporting this level of interaction include Alvis [49], ALVIE [29], and DsCats [24] where the student can give their own input to the algorithms. Furthermore, some algorithms in JHAVÉ allow custom input by students.

Constructing level requires the student to construct his/her own algorithm animation. This can be done, for example, in terms of direct manipulation in some algorithm animation system. It should be noted, that coding of the algorithm is not a requirement on this level.

In MA&DA [69], PILOT [4], and TRAKLA2 [80], students are given a data structure and an algorithm, and they are expected to solve the exercise by simulating algorithm. That is, they are constructing an algorithm animation. Other systems that have been used to require students to construct animations include WinHIPE [137], JHAVÉ, and ALVIE.

Presenting At the highest level, *presenting*, the student presents a visualization for an audience. This can be, for example, a situation where a student presents a visualization for the instructor and peers. The visualization can be made by the student or a third-party.

Nearly all AV systems can be used to present animations. However, some have more features designed to support this level of engagement. ANIMAL supports presenting by having features for changing the animation speed and the magnification, a slider for fast navigation, a table of contents view to jump to points of interest, and generators to enable animation creation on-the-fly [112]. Alvis has a *presentation pointer* which allows pointing to objects in the animation, the *markup pen* to dynamically annotate the animation, and the presenter can dynamically change the animation as it is executing. MatrixPro [58] has the possibility of on-the-fly use, automatic node labeling in data structures, and a library of ready-made data structures.

Changes and extensions to the taxonomy have been proposed. For example, it has been suggested that the constructing level be divided into *constructive simulation* and *code-based constructing* and viewing be divided into *active viewing* and *passive viewing* [75].

Another extension has been proposed by Myller et al. [87]. They consider the engagement taxonomy in the context of program visualization, where they argue that four additional levels should be added. These levels are the following.

- *Controlled viewing* is a higher level of viewing, where the student can control the visualization, for example, by changing its speed or selecting objects to inspect.
- *Entering input* is the next highest level after controlled viewing. On this level, the student should be able to enter input to a program or parameters to a method.
- On the *modifying* level (higher than changing in the original ET), modifications to the visualization are done, for example, by changing the source code or input data.
- *Reviewing* is the highest level of interaction in the extended taxonomy. On this level, visualizations are viewed for giving comments and feedback on the visualization itself.

Since these suggested extensions have not yet received a wide recognition like the original taxonomy, we will use the original engagement taxonomy in the rest of this thesis.

3.2.6 Effectiveness: Are Algorithm Animations Effective?

An important question in pedagogical use of algorithm visualizations is their effectiveness in students' learning. The hypothesis by Hundhausen et al. [50] and Naps et al. [96] is that animations are effective, if they are interactive enough. Not all research on the levels of the engagement have been conclusive by finding statistically significant results supporting this hypothesis, though.

In this work, usage of animation is taken as a presumption and thus we will not examine many evaluation studies comparing no viewing with viewing. Still, we feel obligated to introduce one of the first studies that compared reading from textbook to text with animation [132]. In the post-test, questions about the algorithm were asked. The results of the test showed no significant differences, but the trend favored the group with animation.

The following introduces some of the effectiveness studies done over the years. Note, that the studies presented here include only experiments *com-*

paring different levels of the engagement taxonomy. We have not included pseudo-experimental studies (*i.e.* that had no control group) where *different* engagement levels have not been compared. In addition, we focus on experiments that compare *learning outcomes* instead of other variables like attitude or time spent. More thorough surveys of the evaluation studies related to the engagement taxonomy can be found in [50, 138].

no viewing - viewing - changing 1994 Already in 1994, a study that compared levels no viewing, viewing, and changing was performed [76]. The results showed improvement in learning outcomes as the level of engagement increased. The difference between no viewing and changing was statistically significant.

no viewing - viewing - responding 1999 Byrne et al. [23] compared levels no viewing, viewing, and responding. The no viewing was further divided to no animation and prediction without animation. The results show a trend towards benefit of animations and responding.

viewing - responding 2000 In 2000, an experiment comparing levels viewing and responding was conducted [53]. The results of the survey found no statistically significant differences. However, the data indicated that the students working on level responding scored better on difficult topics, but poorly overall.

viewing - changing 2000 The HalVis system was used in an experiment comparing levels viewing and changing [41]. The viewing group used TANGO [129]. The results report (statistically significant) better learning outcomes for the changing group.

no viewing - viewing - responding 2003 Grissom et al. [39] experimented to compare levels no viewing, viewing, and responding using JHAVÉ. The results show that learning improves as the level of student engagement increases. The difference between no viewing and responding was statistically significant.

viewing - constructing 2003 Hübscher-Younger and Narayanan did an experiment with student constructed representations⁹ of algorithms and viewed peer-created representations [45]. The results showed significantly better learning results for the students authoring visualizations.

⁹These representations were not necessarily visual in the sense of algorithm animation.

viewing - changing - constructing 2006 Lauer [74] reports on a comparison of levels viewing, changing, and constructing. The group using changing performed slightly worse on average, but the difference was not statistically significant.

viewing - constructing 2007 In 2007, a study comparing levels viewing and constructing was conducted [137]. The study detected (in some topics, statistically significant) improvements in learning results on the higher level.

viewing - changing 2007 Myller, Laakso, and Korhonen compared levels viewing and changing in a collaborative environment [88]. Their results indicated that students in changing performed better, although the results were not statistically significant. A second experiment by the same authors in 2008 again compared levels viewing¹⁰ and changing. This time they found statistically significant differences between the learning outcomes in favor of the level changing [70].

viewing - responding 2009 Taylor et al. compared students using passive and predictive animations of graph algorithms [136]. They conclude that students working on the responding level learned better than students viewing passive animations. It is unclear, though, whether or not their results were statistically significant.

Table 3.1 summarizes the results of the surveys introduced above. Notably, no evaluations have been done comparing the level of presenting with the other levels. Presenting AVs has been researched, though, for example, in [46, 47]. In addition, comparisons between responding and the higher levels of engagement seem to be missing as well.

When looking at a larger number of studies including those comparing viewing and no viewing, the results are encouraging. In a meta-study of educational experiments using visualizations, 24 experiments were examined and in 46% of those a significant result was found where the visualization had a positive impact [50]. Only one experiment reported a significant result in the opposite direction.

Although the meta-study by Hundhausen et al. claimed that the engagement with the visualization is more important than the content of the visu-

¹⁰The paper discusses an extended version of the engagement taxonomy. However, the controlled viewing level they use is, in a sense, a slightly higher level of viewing.

Table 3.1: Studies comparing the levels of the Engagement Taxonomy. In the table, \sim indicates a study with no observed differences in learning outcomes, $(+/-)$ indicates a study where higher level of engagement seems to improve/degrade learning outcomes, and $+$ indicates a study where the learning outcomes on the higher level of engagement were statistically significantly higher.

	viewing	responding	changing	constructing	presenting
no viewing	(+) Lawrence [76] (+) Byrne et al. [23] (+) Grissom et al. [39]	(+) Byrne et al. [23] + Grissom et al. [39]	+ Lawrence [76]		
viewing		(+) Byrne et al. [23] \sim Jarc et al. [53] (+) Grissom et al. [39] (+) Taylor et al. [136]	+ Hansen et al. [41] (+) Lawrence [76] (-) Lauer [74] (+) Myller et al. [88] + Laakso et al. [70]	+ Hübscher-Younger and Narayanan [45] \sim Lauer [74] (+) Urquiza-Fuentes [137]	
responding					
changing				(+) Lauer [74]	
constructing					
presenting					

alization [50], other contributing factors have been studied as well. General problems with experimental settings (e.g. multiple variables and lack of control group) were present in several experiments [40]. In addition, according to the same survey, there are often animation specific problems, such as usability issues, lack of student training, low quality animations, and inappropriate difficulty of topics. A survey of successful experiments found narrative and textual contents, feedback to students' answers, and student centered design as common features [138]. Rhodes et al. propose a system called VizEval for easing the evaluation of visualization effectiveness [105]. In their study, they experimented how some perceptual/cognitive characteristics affected the detection of changes in animations.

3.3 Visualizations and Teachers

A well known fact brought up by many of the articles about algorithm visualization is that visualizations are not as widely adopted by teachers as hoped by AV system developers. Mainly, this belief is based on the most comprehensive survey on teachers and visualizations that was reported by an ITiCSE working group in 2002 [95]. Here, we will summarize the key findings; the interested reader should read the cited article. The report consists of three different surveys (named pre-conference survey, Grissom survey, and index card survey in the report) with a total of 186 responses.

Teachers' attitudes towards visualizations are positive. In the pre-conference survey, all respondents strongly agreed (59%) or agreed (41%) with visualizations being helpful for students. In the index card survey, 43% strongly agreed, 49% agreed, and 8% were neutral or had no opinion. The major benefits teachers believe visualizations have can be categorized to creating discussion, anecdotal evidence of "benefit" for student, and improved teaching experience. The top reasons were

- teaching experience is more enjoyable (90%)
- improved student participation (86%)
- anecdotal evidence of class being more fun for students (83%)

Despite the positive attitude, frequent use of visualizations is quite rare. In the Grissom survey, over half of the respondents used dynamic visualizations

in classroom only a few times per term, while 13% never used dynamic visualizations. Outside of classroom, 23% never used dynamic visualizations. In the pre-conference survey, 97% used at least occasionally during lectures, while two-thirds made visualizations available outside class. The main reasons for not using are lack of time and effective tools, with the top reasons mentioned were

- no time to search for good examples (93%)
- no time to learn the new tools (90%)
- no time to develop visualizations (90%)
- lack of effective development tools (83%)

The time required to find good examples can be largely explained by the findings of a survey of existing visualizations [125]. The survey concludes that there is a lack of ready-made, good quality visualizations, especially on more difficult topics.

In another survey for teachers about program visualization, 61% of the 61 respondents were aware of visualization tools [21]. Of those who were aware, 71% used such tools in their teaching. When asking about their interest of using visualizations in teaching, only 41% of the respondents were very interested or interested, while 59% were only somewhat interested. On a side note, the responses revealed that 89% thought explanations would make visualizations more valuable, and 89% thought adaptivity would be valuable.

Part II

Effortless Algorithm Animation

Chapter 4

Taxonomy of Effortless Creation of Algorithm Visualizations

The effort and time needed to create algorithm visualizations is one of the main reasons for educators not adopting AV in their teaching. Thus, in this chapter, we will consider the effortless creation of algorithm visualizations.

In the first step of this research, we identified that there are either specific, low effort systems or general, high effort systems [59]. That research was, however, our subjective view of the topic. The next step of the research was a survey targeting computer science educators [60]. The survey resulted in an initial set of measures for effortlessness. Finally, based on that data, we introduced a Taxonomy of Effortless Creation of Algorithm Visualizations (see Publication [P1]). The main categories of the taxonomy are briefly introduced in the following, for a more detailed discussion, see Publication [P1].

Category Scope This category measures how wide the application area of the visualization system is. The taxonomy defines four levels: *lesson-specific*, *course-specific*, *domain-specific*, and *non-specific* with non-specific systems having the widest scope. For example, a lesson-specific system can only be used on one lecture whereas course-specific can be used on most lectures on a single course.

Category Integrability This category measures the features that make the system easy to integrate into an educational setup. This includes features such as ease of installation, documentation, course management support, and integration into hypertext. From a software engineering point of

view, most of these are simple to implement to a visualization system. However, integration into hypertext is one of the most difficult. Thus, we will present our solution for this in Chapter 10.

Category Interaction This category measures the interaction provided by the system. It distinguishes two types of interaction: *producer-system interaction* and *visualization-consumer interaction*. Producer-system interaction measures the level of preparation needed for different tasks such as lecture examples or creating an exercise for examination. Visualization-consumer interaction measures the level of interaction (or engagement) provided for the user of the visualization.

Publication [P1] includes evaluations of four systems (ANIMAL [114], JAWAA [1], Jeliot 3 [83], and MatrixPro) as an *example* of using this taxonomy. These four were selected due to their different perspectives for learning and teaching. In addition, we required them to fulfill certain criteria, mainly the systems should have similar application areas, be freely available, be still developed further, be platform independent, and provide ways to create animations instead of just viewing them. The main finding in the evaluation is that there are no generic systems that can be used without prior preparation (see Figure 4.1). We believe this to be true for the existing AA systems, although the evaluation included only four systems. Thus, the final question in the article is, can such a system be developed? The AA systems are headed to this direction by developing more ways the systems can be used without prior preparation and for wider application areas. In the next chapter, we will introduce the MatrixPro system that is course-specific and that can be used on-the-fly.

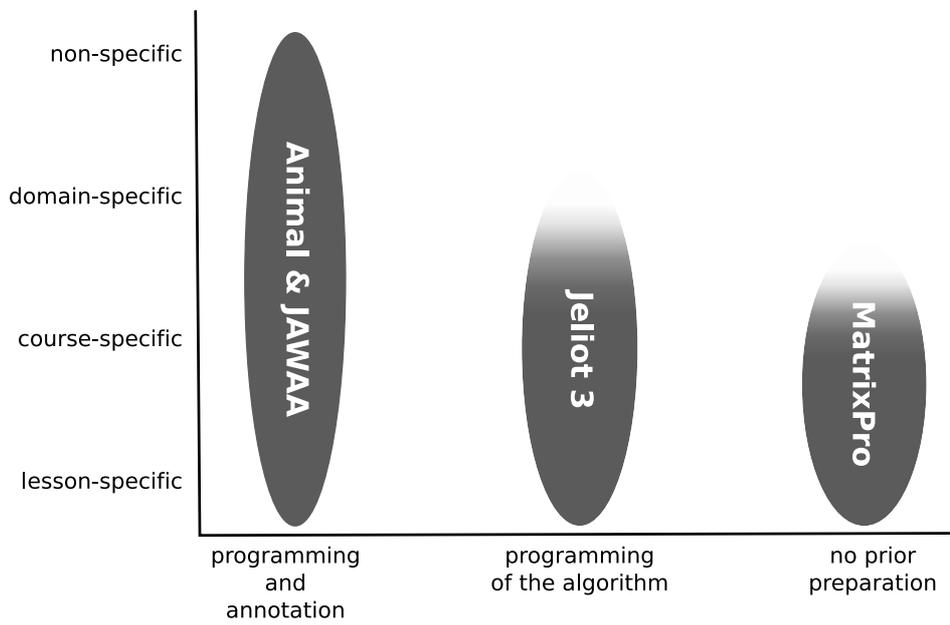


Figure 4.1: Evaluation of effortlessness of four AA systems. A single system might support several levels of producer-system interaction, but only the most typical level is marked.

Chapter 5

MatrixPro

Publication [P2] introduces a new algorithm animation system called MatrixPro (see Figure 5.1) that allows on-the-fly creation of algorithm animations. It is based on the Matrix algorithm simulation framework [66]. The following will briefly summarize the main features of the system. A more detailed description can be found in Publication [P2].

In MatrixPro, the animations are created using *visual algorithm simulation* [65]. In this approach, the user manipulates visualizations of the underlying structure and creates a sequence of simulation steps. These steps include basic variable assignments, reference manipulation, and operation invocations such as insertions and deletions. All the operations are done using direct manipulation, that is, by drag and dropping. In the reference model of Figure 2.1 on page 10, visual algorithm simulation is different from the other approaches. There is no raw data¹, and the data tables are created and modified through interacting with the visual structures or the view.

The main window of MatrixPro is shown in Figure 5.1. The main functionality of the system is in the toolbar on the left and the menubar (not shown in the figure). The toolbar is an essential component which enables users to modify the created animations. Through the toolbar the user can modify the animation easily, for example, by changing the granularity of the animation sequence. In addition, the toolbar (as well as the menubar) contains controls for moving backward and forward in the animation.

¹Unless one wants to think the mental model of the person doing the simulation as the raw data.

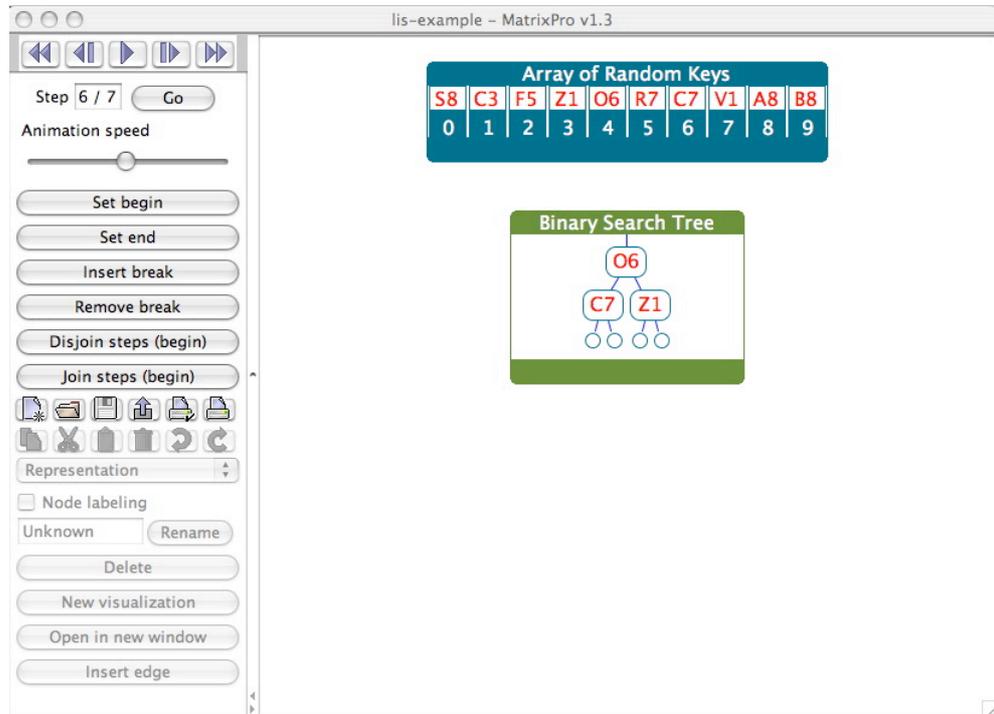


Figure 5.1: MatrixPro main window. On the left is the toolbar that allows manipulation of the animation, generated through dragging and dropping items in the visualization view on the right.

The area of visualizations contains the visualizations of the data structures that the user can interact with in terms of visual algorithm simulation. The simulation consists of *drag and drop operations* which can be carried out by picking up the *source* and moving it onto the *target*. Each single operation performs the *proper* action for the corresponding underlying data structure. An action is proper if the underlying data structure object accepts the change (*e.g.*, change of a key value in a node or change of a reference target).

The main features of the system are the following.

On-the-fly usage The most important feature of MatrixPro is the ability to use the system on-the-fly. This is achieved by combining the visual algorithm simulation and a library of ready-made data structures that can be animated. For example, insertion to a B-tree can be demonstrated by simply drag and dropping keys on the B-tree visualization.

Customized animations The system supports customization of animations

in two ways. The instructor can use whatever input data he/she wants. In addition, the granularity level of the animation can be changed, that is, how large steps are shown when playing the animation.

Storing and Retrieving Animations Although the system supports on-the-fly usage, some instructors still want to prepare their animations in advance. For this purpose, MatrixPro supports storing and retrieving of the created animations. The animation can be stored as serialized Java objects or exported as Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) [141]. In addition, single steps in the animation can be exported as Portable Network Graphics (PNG) or T_EXdraw² pictures.

Customizable user-interface The user interface of MatrixPro can be easily customized by changing the set of toolbar objects. This allows it to fit the needs of various users. For example, when demonstrating ready-made animations on lecture, the instructor probably needs only the animation controls and the visualization view.

Library MatrixPro includes a library of data structures that can be used to produce animations making the production process less error-prone.

The fact that MatrixPro can be used on-the-fly without prior preparation makes it effortless to use. However, as Figure 4.1 illustrates, the scope of MatrixPro is limited. Thus, this system is not the answer for the general question of the Taxonomy of effortless creation of algorithm animations: can a generic systems that can be used without prior preparation be developed? Yet, it is a step towards the killer-application, the problem now becomes how to generalize this system to other application areas? This will be a future research problem.

²See <http://www.ctex.org/documents/packages/graphics/texdraw.pdf> for details on T_EXdraw.

Part III

Algorithm Animation Languages

Chapter 6

Features of Algorithm Animation Languages

This chapter shows the main characteristics of the algorithm animation languages. As stated earlier, we see algorithm animation language as a textual representation describing an algorithm animation or visualization and it should have a well-defined set of concepts, syntax, and semantics.

The distinction between algorithm animation languages and other languages is slightly fuzzy. The main principle is that a language has to have something specifically designed for animating algorithms to be considered an algorithm animation language. This can be, for example, data structures and operations on them, coding concepts, or interaction. These features are often missing from general purpose graphical description languages. Typically, however, another strong indicator is that there is an algorithm animation system that uses the language.

While reading this chapter, the reader should keep in mind that we deal with the languages, not the systems. Some of the features considered might be available in a system, but not through the language the system uses. In addition, the reader should note that this introduction will not state every feature of the languages, only the ones that are most common or distinctive. Also, the examples shown of the languages are often not complete with all the details required in the language and they most likely cannot be used as-is in any system. For descriptions of the languages themselves, see Publication [P3] or the cited articles.

6.1 Representation Format

The first noticeable feature is the format of the language. All the languages we are discussing have a textual format. Listing 6.1 gives a simple example of ANIMALSCRIPT [113], the scripting language of ANIMAL.

```

1 circle "C" (150, 100) radius 30 color black filled fillColor
   red depth 3
2 move "C" along line (130, 80) (130, 170) within 200 ms

```

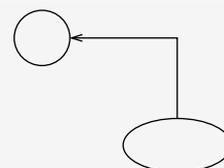
Listing 6.1: Example of graphical primitives and basic animation in ANIMALSCRIPT.

In the recent languages, XML as a format has become more and more popular because it makes it easy for software to process the data using the multitude of different tools available. Listing 6.2 gives an example of an XML format, GraphXML [43].

```

1 <node name="example">
2   <position x="20" y="20"/>
3   <size width="20" height="10"/>
4 </node>
5 <node name="example2">...</node>
6 <edge source="example" target="example2">
7   <path type="polyline">
8     <position x="10" y="5"/>
9     <position x="30" y="5"/>
10    <position x="30" y="20"/>
11  </path>
12 </edge>

```



Listing 6.2: Example of GraphXML showing node geometry example.

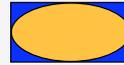
6.2 Level of Abstraction

A distinguishing characteristic of the languages is the level of abstraction they use to describe the animations. One extreme is the languages that use graphical primitives to describe the animations. This approach allows the visualizer to visualize almost anything he/she wants to. Listing 6.3 gives an example of graphical primitive visualization in JAWAA [1].

```

1 rectangle r1 10 10 100 50 black blue
2 oval o1 10 10 100 50 black orange

```



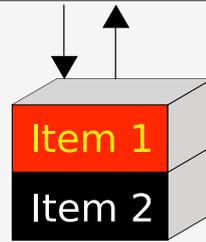
Listing 6.3: An example of JAWAA graphical primitives.

The other extreme is the animation languages that describe the animation using data structures. Listing 6.4 gives an example of using a stack in GaigsXML [91].

```

1 <snap>
2   <title>Stack example</title>
3   <stack>
4     <list_item color="red">
5       <label>Item 1</label>
6     </list_item>
7     <list_item color="black">
8       <label>Item 2</label>
9     </list_item>
10  </stack>
11 </snap>

```



Listing 6.4: Example of GaigsXML showing a stack example.

It should be noted, that it is typical for the languages with graphical primitives to have some data structures as well. For example, JAWAA, mentioned in the example above, includes several data structures as well as the graphical primitives.

6.3 Animation

Since we are dealing with algorithm animation, the languages support also animating the visualizations. Again, animation by modifying the graphical primitives is the lowest level of abstraction. Listing 6.5 shows an example of graphical primitive animation of SAMBA [131].

```

1 circle c1 0.8 0.8 0.1 red half
2 rectangle r1 0.1 0.9 0.1 0.1 blue solid
3 comment Exchanging circle and rectangle!
4 exchangepos c1 r1

```

Listing 6.5: Example of Samba command language.

The other approach is again to modify the data structures using some of the operations specified for them. Listing 6.6 gives an example of animating an array in SALSA [49].

```

1 create array a1 with 3 cells
2 set a1[0] to 1
3 set a1[1] to 6
4 set a1[2] to 11
5 make a1[2] say "swapping me with 6"
6 swap a1[1] with a2[2]

```

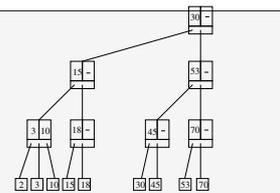
Listing 6.6: Example of SALSA commands.

Listing 6.7 gives an example of using high-level data structure operations in DsCats language [24]. In the example, keys are inserted into a B-Tree in two steps. Finally, a key is deleted from the tree. Note also the pause operation that requires the user to interact with the animation by restarting the play.

```

1 OPTION DS B-TREE
2 INSERT 20 15 30 2 18 24 70 3 45
3 INSERT 10
4 PAUSE -- End of inserts
5 DELETE 24

```



Listing 6.7: DsCats command language example. The figure represents the data structure after the operations are executed.

It should also be noted that not all the languages describe animations as modifications done to the visual objects. For example, GaigsXML approaches animation by allowing the visualizer to specify discrete snapshots of the state of the data structures. These snapshots are then visualized by the system.

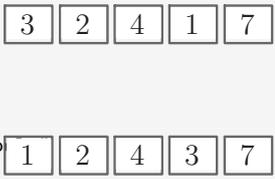
6.4 Programming Concepts

Some of the languages support the creation of animations using programming constructs such as variables, conditionals, and loops. Listing 6.8 shows an example of the ANIMALSCRIPT2 [115] programming concepts.

```

1 array "values" (10, 10) length 5 int {3, 2, 4, 1, 7}
2 int pos = 1
3 int minIndex = 0
4 arrayMarker "pos" on "values" at Index pos label "pos"
5 arrayMarker "minIndex" on "values" at Index minIndex label "minIndex"
6 while ( pos < 5 ) {
7   if ( values[pos] < values[minIndex] ) {
8     minIndex = pos ;
9     moveMarker "minIndex" to position pos within 5 ticks
10  }
11  pos = pos + 1
12  moveMarker "pos" to position pos within 5 ticks
13 }
14 arraySwap on "values" position 0 with minIndex within 10
    ticks

```



Listing 6.8: An example of programming concepts of ANIMALSCRIPT2 [115]. The figure shows the array before (above) and after (below) the elements are swapped.

6.5 Interaction

Interaction is another feature of some of the animation languages. SALSA, for example, includes a command to request input data from the user. Listing 6.9 gives an example of this asking the user to give an integer value for variable `var1` and integer values for elements in array `arr1`.

```

1 input var1 as integer between 1 and 20
2 input elements of arr1 as integers

```

Listing 6.9: Example of SALSA input command.

GaigsXML supports another kind of interaction requiring users of the visualization to respond to pop-up questions specified in the language. Listing 6.10 gives an example of the specification of a question in GaigsXML. ANIMAL has also been extended to support this kind of interaction [116].

```
1 <show>
2   <snap>
3     ...
4     <question_ref ref="0"/>
5   </snap>
6   ...
7   <questions>
8     <question type="MCQUESTION" id="0">
9       <question_text>What will the value of node A be in the
10        next step?</question_text>
11       <answer_option>3</answer_option>
12       <answer_option is_correct="yes">8</answer_option>
13       <answer_option>5</answer_option>
14     </question>
15   </questions>
</show>
```

Listing 6.10: Example of interactive questions in GaigsXML.

Chapter 7

Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages

Based on the features present in the existing algorithm animation languages and to allow easier comparison of the languages, a taxonomy of algorithm animation languages was defined. The first version of the taxonomy was published in [55] and an extended version in [57]. The current version is presented in Publication [P3] and we only summarize it here. Figure 7.1 illustrates the two top levels of the taxonomy.

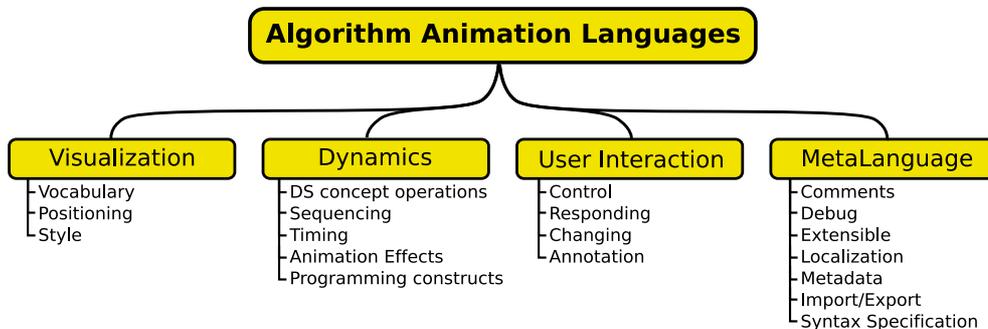


Figure 7.1: Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages.

The main categories of the taxonomy are *Visualization*, *Dynamics*, *User Interaction*, and *MetaLanguage*. These categories are illustrated in Figure 7.2. In the following, we will briefly describe the main categories of the taxonomy. For a more detailed discussion, see Publication [P3]. The article also evaluates

some of the algorithm animation languages introduced in the previous chapter using the taxonomy, here we only summarize the findings of the evaluation.

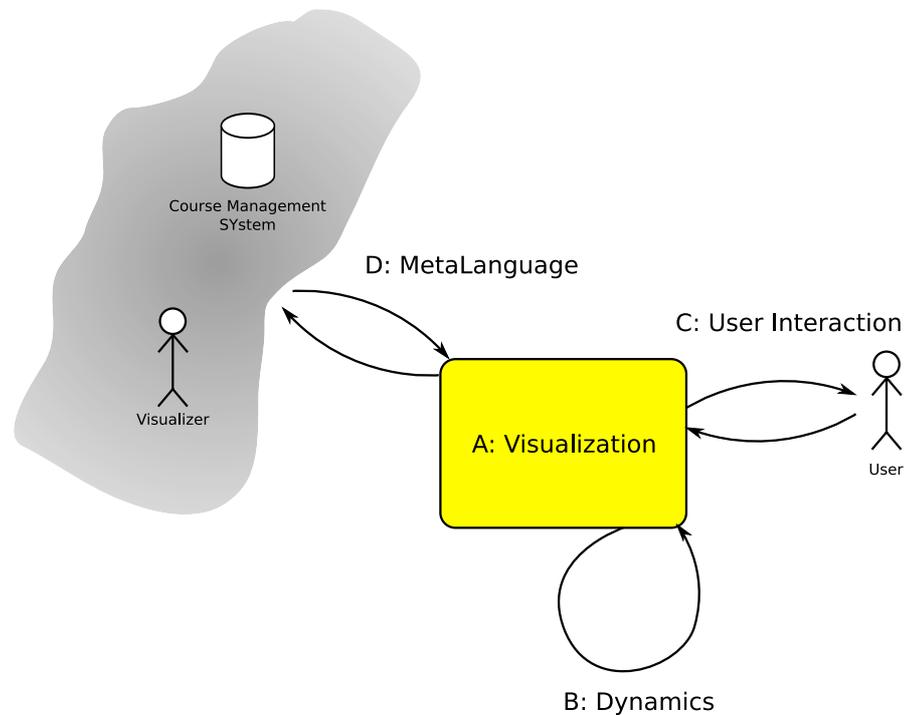


Figure 7.2: Top-level categories of the Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages.

Category Visualization The category Visualization describes the features of the language used to create static visualizations for describing one state in the animation. In essence, it considers the variety of supported object types, that is, the building blocks used in the animation as well as ways to position and style the objects. Visualization has three subcategories: *vocabulary*, *positioning*, and *style*.

Category Dynamics The category Dynamics describes the level and versatility of animation effects available in the language and how the final animation can be customized through the language. These are the ways the visualizations can be changed when moving from state to state. Dynamics has five subcategories: *data structure (DS) concept operations*, *sequencing*, *timing*, *animation effects*, and *programming constructs*.

Category User Interaction The category User Interaction describes the type and level of interaction provided for the end-user of animations that can be specified using the language. User Interaction has four subcategories: *Control*, *Responding*, *Changing*, and *Annotation*. When using the taxonomy, emphasis should be placed on distinguishing between the interaction provided by the tool and interaction supported by the language. This distinction is not always clear, as the language implementations may be tied to visualization systems. However, the key issue in this regard is that the language specification includes interactive features and actions that can be stored into a file containing the animation script, regardless of how a system presents them to the user.

Category MetaLanguage The category MetaLanguage describes the support of features that are not directly related to algorithm animation but instead are useful in the animation creation process. These are features that are not directly visible to the end user. The subcategories in MetaLanguage are *comments*, *debug*, *extensible*, *localization*, *metadata*, *import/export*, and *syntax specification*.

Summary and Discussion In this section, we have introduced a Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages. As a result, we have a more detailed overview of the features and properties of the languages. In Publication [P3] we evaluated several algorithm animation languages. For comparison purposes we also evaluated Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) [141]. The evaluation done could be summarized by stating again that there are languages supporting graphical primitives and languages supporting data structures. In addition, SVG has the most advanced features in many of the categories, especially when SVG is used together with ECMAScript¹. However, SVG is missing the data structures that are essential in AA. Some other useful findings from the evaluation include:

- Integration of multimedia into algorithm animation languages is lacking.
- There is virtually no support for ADT operations on non-linear data structures such as trees and graphs.
- Programming constructs are rarely present in AALs, and are nowhere near as rich as programming constructs of real programming languages.

¹SVG documents can include ECMAScript [35] code and is often used this way.

- There is a clear lack of user interaction features in AALs.

The evaluation of the languages is straightforward, although it requires quite deep knowledge and understanding of the evaluated languages. In the future, as AA languages are developed further and new features emerge, this taxonomy is likely to be outdated. In such case, updates to the taxonomy should be made.

Chapter 8

Proposal for Standard Algorithm Animation Language

In this chapter, we will introduce our proposal for a standard algorithm animation language. The work is based on the report of an ITiCSE Working Group (Publication [P4]), and we will start this chapter by describing the report and move on to our proposed language, XAAL (eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language).

8.1 ITiCSE XML Working Group

In the Conference on Innovation and Technology in Computer Science Education (ITiCSE) 2005 a working group titled “*Development of XML-based Tools to Support User Interaction with Algorithm Visualization*” convened to come up with XML specifications to support algorithm animation. The group visioned a set of features of a common algorithm animation language and wrote a report that introduces them (see Publication [P4]). In addition, the report discusses a proposed architecture for adding support for an XML specification to existing visualization systems. This architecture is presented in Figure 8.1.

The various parts of the architecture are responsible for handling different aspects of the data that is to be visualized. The responsibilities are the following.

- *Elaborator* connects interesting events with objects. For example, connecting event *insert 6* to an instance of binary search tree object.

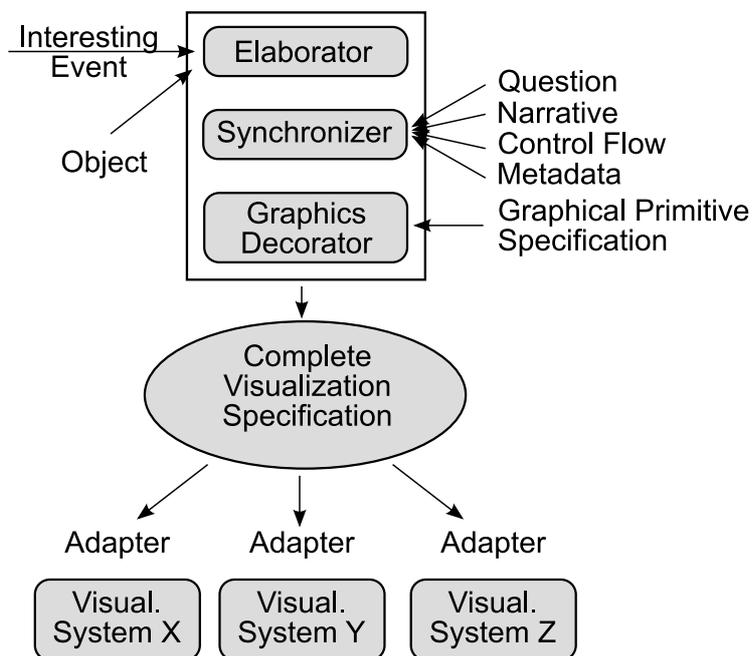


Figure 8.1: The proposed architecture of adding XML specification support to visualization systems [97].

- *Synchronizer* augments the output of the elaborator by adding pedagogical hooks. These hooks are questions, narratives, control flow, and metadata related to the current interesting event.
- *Graphics Decorator* adds graphical information about the layout to the output of the synchronizer.

The output of the graphics decorator is called *complete visualization specification*. This visualization specification includes all information needed to view a visualization in a visualization system. The complete visualization specification can possibly be adapted for a visualization system using an *adapter*. The data in the different points of the process are:

- *Interesting events* are conceptual level actions on an object that can be visualized. These events can be hierarchically organized so that upper level events include series of lower level events. For example, binary search tree insert can consist of creating a new node, finding a correct position for the new node by traversing the tree, and connecting the new

node to the correct position in the tree. The interesting events can be produced by executing a program or by a visualization author.

- High level *objects* are used to describe the targets of the interesting events. Typically, in the field of algorithm animation, these are data structures.
- *Questions* can be associated with events in the visualization. These questions can be, for example, prediction-style questions.
- *Narrations* can be used to attach descriptions (text, graphics, and audio) related to the event.
- *Control flow* specification can be used to associate (pseudo)code lines with the event to be visualized.
- *Metadata* can be used for providing additional information.
- *Graphical primitives* specification is used to attach information on how the event should be visualized in terms of graphical primitives and transformations on them.

In the next section when we discuss XAAL, we have adopted some of the ready defined and suitable parts of the WG specifications in order to support the international goal of a uniform algorithm animation language specification. However, most of the aspects of AA were not formally defined by the working group. Thus, not all of these specifications are used as a part of the new language.

Due to the fact that the working group did not come up with definite specifications, the development of the specifications has continued in different projects. The next section will introduce our proposal for a standard algorithm animation language. The other project by the members of the working group has been done by Loboda et al. [77]. They have specified two XML languages for specifying visualizations and content. They suggest a distributed framework for visualization that is based on the interesting events produced by a program or an algorithm. For describing the content, they have specified *c-XML* and for the visualization, *v-XML*.

As the main reason for two different projects continuing the work of the WG we see the lack of further meetings by the WG members. Originally, the hope was to convene again a year after the original working group [97]. This, however, did not happen.

8.2 Xaal

Based on the Taxonomy of Algorithm Animation Languages and the work by the ITiCSE Working Group, we have defined a new AA language, XAAL (eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language). XAAL is defined as an XML language by specifying the allowed document structure. XML makes it easy for any software to process data using the multitude of different tools and architectures available today. In addition, transforming XML documents to different XML formats or text is relatively simple and flexible using XSLT (Extensible Stylesheet Language Transformations).

The following will briefly introduce the most important features of XAAL. The reader should note that this text is merely an overview of the language. For a more detailed discussion, see Publication [P5] and [55], and for the actual XML schemas, see the XAAL website¹.

Graphical Primitives The basic graphical components that can be composed to represent arbitrarily complex objects (*e.g.*, a tree or a graph data structure) are graphical primitives. The graphical primitives in XAAL are as specified by the working group, where the following primitives have been defined: point, polyline, line, polygon, arc, ellipse, circle and circle segment, square, triangle, rectangle, and text.

Data Structures XAAL supports the usage of data structures to specify the visualizations, lowering the effort needed to produce them. The set of structures is basically the same as, for example, in JAWAA [1]: array, graph, list, and tree. What distinguishes XAAL from the other AA languages is the support for different approaches of existing algorithm animation languages, by allowing all structures to contain an optional graphical presentation indicating how the structure should be visualized.

Animation A crucial part of the algorithm animation language is the animation functionality. The *animation operations* in XAAL have been divided in three groups: graphical primitive transformations (for example, rotate), elementary data structure operations (for example, replace), and abstract data structure operations (for example, insert). Every abstract operation can contain the same transformation on a lower level of abstraction as graphical primitive transformations and as elementary data

¹<http://xaal.org/>

structure operations. However, these are both optional. An example of these abstraction levels can be seen in Listing 8.1.

<pre> 1 <delete target="BST"> 2 <key value="C"/> 3 <elementary> 4 <remove target="nodeC"/> 5 <remove target="edgeCA"/> 6 <replace target="edgeMC"> 7 <edge from="nodeM" to="nodeA"/> 8 </replace> 9 </elementary> 10 <graphical> 11 <!-- operation as graphical operations --> 12 </graphical> 13 </delete> </pre>	
---	--

Listing 8.1: Example of different levels of abstraction in animation. The `delete` operation is included as elementary operations as well as graphical operations for systems not capable of using the data structure operations. The figure on the left is before the delete and on the right after it.

After the initial version of the specification was released, we have added some features to the language. *Questions* were added due to their central role in student engagement. For the questions, the specification by the working group was adopted. Another addition were *markers* that allow pointing to some (parts of) data structures such as array indexes. These are mainly used to track variables in algorithms and were adapted from the ANIMALSCRIPT specification [113].

The XAAL specification can be seen as the complete visualization specification of the working group. As far as we know, it is the only such language specification currently available. However, a XAAL document is not required to include all the aspects but all can be included when wanted. We have defined an XML Schema for XAAL. To make the language more modular, we have divided the schema into several XML Schema documents roughly corresponding to the different aspects indicated by the working group. This kind of modularity makes it possible to more easily change or reuse some parts of this language in other languages and algorithm animation systems.

8.2.1 Taxonomic Evaluation

In this section we will use the taxonomy defined in Publication [P3] to evaluate XAAL. In addition, we will include the evaluation of SVG and compare XAAL with SVG. Reason for using SVG is that in Chapter 7 we concluded SVG having the richest set of features in many of the categories. Note, that the evaluation results in this section differ slightly from the ones presented in Publication [P3] since here we consider the latest version of XAAL available online at <http://xaal.org/>, while the publication evaluates the version published in [55].

Vocabulary Table 8.1 indicates that XAAL can be considered semantically complete in the sense that it supports graphical primitives as well as data structures. SVG, on the other hand, supports only graphical primitives. Hypertext and sound are supported by both.

Table 8.1: Evaluation of the languages in category Vocabulary.

Language	DS Concepts	DS Components	Graphical primitives	Multimedia	
				Hypertext	Sound
XAAL	Tree, graph, array, list	Node, reference	Yes	Xhtml	Audio files
SVG	None	None	Yes	Yes	Audio files

Positioning Evaluation of XAAL in category Positioning is in Table 8.2. Like many of the existing AA languages, XAAL supports 2 dimensions with the additional depth setting for overlapping objects. Layout for data structures can be specified in XAAL but this is not required. This allows it to be used in tools that support automatic layout as well as in tools where the layout must be user specified. Except for layout, features in SVG are quite similar in this category.

Table 8.2: Evaluation of the languages in category Positioning.

Language	DS concept layout				Multiple Views	Coordinates	Dimensions	Grouping
	Orientation	Visual size	Automatic Layout	Manual Layout				
XAAL	Yes	No	Yes	Optional	No	Absolute, relative	2.5	yes
SVG	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No	Absolute, relative	2	yes

Style Evaluation of XAAL in category Style is in Table 8.3. XAAL supports colors as RGB values and some predefined color names (the same 17 colors as in CSS2 [142]). Compared to existing AA languages, the styling options in XAAL are more than adequate. However, SVG has a more diverse set of styling options, and including these in XAAL remains a future challenge.

The advanced feature compared to the existing AA languages is the support for reusable and extensible stylesheets. These are not, however, as versatile as in SVG due to the more limited styling functionality of XAAL.

Data Structure Operations The languages are evaluated in category *Data Structure Operations* in Table 8.4. Compared to the existing AA languages, XAAL has quite a rich set of data structure operations. However, these require advanced features from the system implementing the language. SVG, on the other hand, lacks the data structures and operations on them. Thus, it has no features that make it especially suitable for algorithm animation.

Sequencing and Timing The languages are evaluated in categories *Sequencing* and *Timing* in Table 8.5. XAAL supports both granularity control and concurrency, being the only language to do so. In Timing, XAAL has the typical possibilities to set the delay and duration of an animation. However, SVG is even more versatile as the animation operations can be set a minimum or maximum duration, number of repeats, repeat duration, key times, etc.

Table 8.3: Evaluation of the languages in category Style.

Language	Colors	Fill style	Font			Line style	Opacity	Shape	Stylesheets
			Family	Size	Variant				
XAML	Predefined, RGB	Solid, none	Yes	Yes	Bold, italic	Width, color, dashed, arrow- heads	Yes	Yes	Yes
SVG	Predefined, RGB	Solid, gra- dient, pat- tern	Yes	Yes	Weight, caps, oblique, stretch	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 8.4: Evaluation of the languages in category Data Structure Operations.

Language	ADT operations	DS Implementation Operations	DS Component Operations
XAAL	Insert, delete, search	Create, remove, replace	None
SVG	None	None	None

Table 8.5: Evaluation of the languages in categories Sequencing and Timing.

Language	Sequencing		Timing
	Granul. control	Concurrency	
XAAL	yes	yes	delay, duration
SVG	no	yes	delay, duration, min, max, repeat, key times

Animation Effects The languages are evaluated in category *Animation Effects* in Table 8.6. In both languages, all the style properties (see Category Style) can be changed. In XAAL, the graphical primitive transformations available are the ones defined by the ITiCSE XML Working Group. Thus, XAAL fulfills the requirements for an algorithm animation language as seen by the international AA community. However, these features are not as versatile as in SVG which also includes skew and matrix transformations.

Table 8.6: Evaluation of the languages in category Animation Effects.

Language	Attributes		Transformations		
	Style Effects	Visibility	Rotate	Scale	Translate
XAAL	yes	show/hide, opacity	yes	yes	yes
SVG	yes	opacity	yes	yes	yes

Table 8.7: Evaluation of the languages in category Programming Constructs.

Language	Elements				Control Flow			
	Declarations	Expressions	Assignments	Types	Seq. statements	Branching	Loops	Subroutines
XAAL	Element IDs	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no
SVG	yes	yes	yes	yes (boolean, strings, custom types)	yes	yes	yes	yes

Programming Constructs As can be seen from Table 8.7, programming constructs are not supported in XAAL. They are not common in other algorithm animation languages either. Only few of the most recent languages like ANIMALSCRIPT2 and SALSA have support for expressions and control flow structures such as branching and loops. SVG with ECMAScript has all the features of the full programming language.

User Interaction The evaluation of XAAL in category Interaction is represented in Table 8.8. XAAL supports pausing the animation and responding to questions. Plain SVG includes no User Interaction. However, when used together with ECMAScript, SVG can be considered to support any kind of interaction. For example, interaction on responding level can be implemented by showing questions for the student. In general, interaction features in AA languages are not common. Thus, interaction is typically left to the tool implementing the language.

Table 8.8: Evaluation of the languages in category User Interaction.

Language	Control	Responding	Changing	Annotation
XAAL	pause	yes	no	no
SVG	yes	yes	yes	yes

MetaLanguage Evaluation of XAAL in category MetaLanguage is in Table 8.9. In XAAL, we decided not to use any standard for the metadata due to the

sheer complexity of such standards. XAAL has, however, support for more metadata than the existing AA languages. We also believe that including a small but specified amount of metadata is more beneficial than allowing arbitrary metadata, as done in SVG. Again, in future versions, we might decide to also endorse some metadata standard. Another interesting notion is that import/export functionality is not offered in any AAL.

Table 8.9: Evaluation of the languages in category MetaLanguage.

Language	Comm	Debug	Ext	Local	Meta	I/E	Spec
XAAL	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no	XML Schema
SVG	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	XML DTD

Part IV

Applications of Xaal in Education

Chapter 9

Xaal in Algorithm Animation Systems

To gain some support from the algorithm animation community, we have designed a set of tools aiding in the usage of XAAL in existing and future algorithm animation systems. In this chapter, we will introduce different processes to add XAAL support as well as discuss our proof of concept implementations of these.

9.1 Implementation Approaches

We have a prototype implementation of the language and transformations to/from various existing algorithm animation languages. In the following, we will briefly describe these prototypes and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different solutions, as well as state the level of XAAL features supported.

The center of the XAAL implementation is XAAL Objects (XO) (see Figure 9.1). This is a collection of Java classes that correspond to the different elements and attributes in XAAL documents. The XAAL objects hierarchy can be generated in multiple ways, the most natural of which is the XAAL parser. The XAAL objects and XAAL parser prototype implementations support most of the elements and functionality specified in the language. The tools also include a graphics decorator able to add graphical information to the data

structures used. One major lack of the current parser is that it does not behave well when the source document is not well-formed XML.

Like the XML Schema definitions of XAAL, the parser is modular. For each of the aspects of the visualization pipeline proposed by the working group, there is a parser module that handles the relevant information. This allows easy reuse of the parts in other contexts. In addition, by enabling/disabling only some modules in the parser, the information can be filtered to fit different needs. Furthermore, the parser is extensible allowing the addition of new modules for additional language features in the future.

The existing AV systems can implement *adapters* that convert the XAAL object hierarchy into an animation in that particular system. By implementing a *generator*, the existing systems can generate the object hierarchy and serialize it as XAAL. These concepts are illustrated in Figure 9.1.

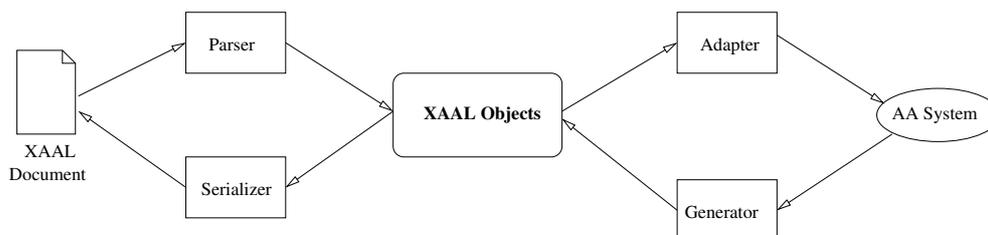


Figure 9.1: Integrating XAAL with existing AA systems using an object hierarchy.

This solution requires no major modifications to the existing systems, and thus the workload of implementing XAAL remains fairly low. Another advantage is that the document has to be parsed only once. There is, however, one extra step in the process compared to the direct approach of parsing the XAAL document directly into the AV system. However, implementing a XAAL parser for each system would not be sensible, and thus the extra processing is not considered a major issue.

Another way to integrate XAAL with existing systems is to transform it to a format of the target system using XSLT [140]. This method provides a simple solution to import XAAL documents into existing AV systems that have an algorithm animation language. It can also be used to export different formats from a system that supports XAAL.

The benefit of this approach is that the XSLT stylesheets are quite simple to write for a person who knows the syntax of XAAL, the target language,

and XSLT. Moreover, the target system need not be changed at all. This makes it possible to use XAAL in systems that are not open-source. On the negative side, this approach requires parsing of three files: the stylesheet, the XAAL document, and the generated AV system document. In addition, XSLT is somewhat limited in programming-like features making the transformation of some language features quite cumbersome.

9.2 Using Xaal Animations

To support the adoption of XAAL, we have also made it possible to use these animations in existing visualization systems as well as in different learning/teaching situations (see Figure 9.2).

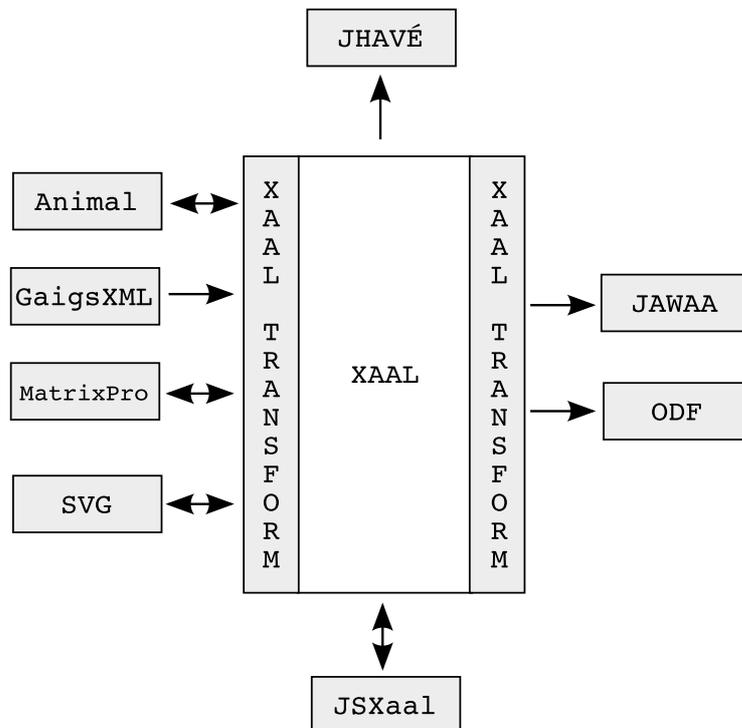


Figure 9.2: The possible ways to benefit from the XAAL animations.

The first transformations done were to Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG), ANIMALSCRIPT [113] and the scripting language of JAWAA 2.0 [1]. These transformations are done using the XSLT approach. These were done to evaluate the appropriateness of the XSLT based transformations as well as get

some experience on how the XAAL language translates to other languages. As it turned out, the XSLT approach is not suitable for transforming complete animations. Single static states in the animation using only graphical primitives were implemented well enough. However, major problems arise when trying to use features like relative coordinates in the animation or how to draw data structures.

As the MatrixPro was introduced as part of this work, a natural choice was to have an adapter capable of importing XAAL animations into it. This was done using the object hierarchy approach. Due to the fact that MatrixPro works only with data structures and operations on them, this solution supports only these aspects of the XAAL specification.

The last one of the existing animation systems that we worked with was JHAVÉ [92]. JHAVÉ is not an AV system but rather an environment for different AV systems called AV engines. In [94], AV developers were encouraged to create new visualizers for JHAVÉ. Thus, we created a visualization engine for the environment that was capable of viewing XAAL animations. This solution originally supported only graphical primitives and discrete animation. However, David Furcy at UW-Oshkosh has continued the work by adding smooth animation to the engine. In addition, he has developed a series of XAAL animations for a completely different topic: mathematics. An example is presented in Figure 9.3. These examples are currently available online in the production version of JHAVÉ. This gives us indication that the XAAL language, although aimed at data structures and algorithms, is not restricted to this field.

For merging with hypertext to be used in online learning, we have proposed an approach to use a JavaScript and HTML based XAAL viewer to achieve seamless integration between learning material and animations. This approach will be introduced in more detail in Publication [P6] and Chapter 10.

To promote the usage of AV on lectures, we propose a solution for automatically creating lecture slides from XAAL animations. This solutions is described in detail in Publication [P7] and Chapter 11.

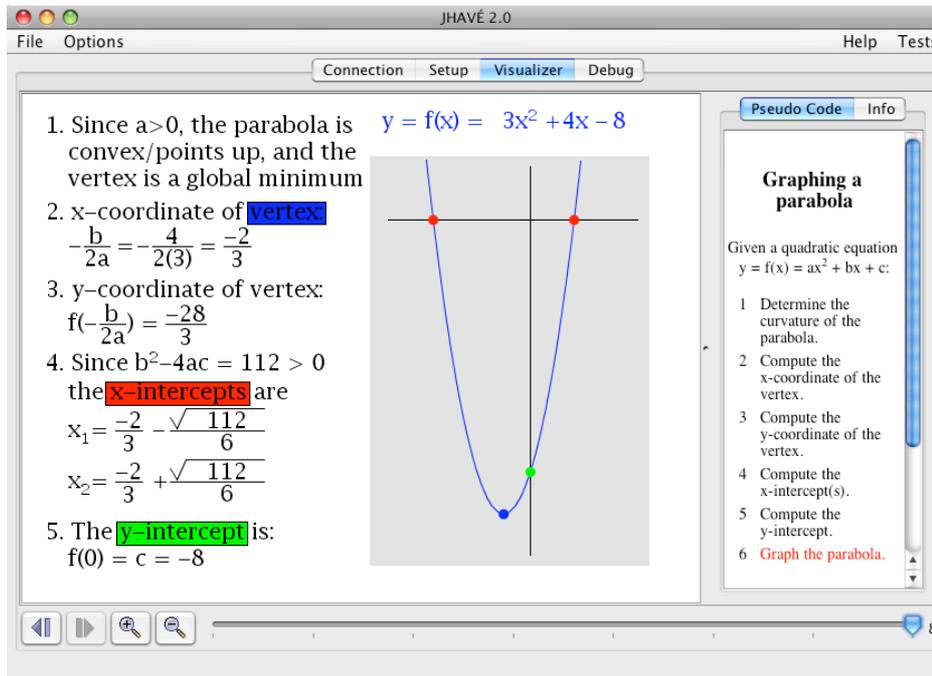


Figure 9.3: Example of an algorithm animation of graphing a parabola in JHAVÉ using the XAAL visualizer.

9.3 Producing Xaal Animations

As important as being able to use XAAL animations, is the ability to create them. Where does one get XAAL animations, then? The first possibility is to write the XML by hand. Although this is possible, it obviously is not the most effortless choice of creating animations. Especially since there are several other choices available.

The tools supporting XAAL allows the generation of XAAL objects through a Java API. This can then be serialized into XML. Of course the XAAL source can be directly written by a program, as done in the animations on mathematics in JHAVÉ.

An effortless way to create XAAL animations is to use an extended version of MatrixPro and create animations simply by dragging and dropping keys and nodes into various data structures and export the animation as XAAL. This approach, however, is limited to the selection of data structures and algorithms shipped with the MatrixPro system.

Another source of animations is to use the existing GaigsXML animations used in JHAVÉ. In addition, new animations can be created with the Java API provided in JHAVÉ [91]. These GaigsXML animations can be transformed into XAAL using an XSLT stylesheet. This stylesheet is probably the most comprehensive in that it supports nearly all features of the GaigsXML language.

The final choice is to use the proof of concept implementation of XAAL generator in ANIMAL [114] as described in Publication [P7]. This way the multitude of existing ANIMAL generators can be used, and new generators created. This and the GaigsXML transformation provide ways to reuse existing animations; a possibility we see extremely important.

9.4 Implementation-based Evaluation

Although the language does not include some of the most complex features that came up (for example, programming concepts), XAAL is still quite a complex language. The current prototype implementation is a good indicator of this, since the original aim of this thesis was to provide a full implementation. However, that was not achieved due to the limited time to finish the thesis.

Nevertheless, we can consider the feasibility of XAAL as an intermediate language. The main problem in the implementation are the different levels of abstraction. Transformations of animations from one abstraction level to another are bound to lose some information. In addition, unless the source format includes all the necessary information, it is difficult to transform animations between different levels of abstraction. Another problem is caused by languages such as GaigsXML, where the structure of the language is based on snapshots of the animation. Since XAAL presents the animation as modifications to the elements, conversion of animation between these languages would probably require some complex XSLT templates. However, we believe that this could definitely be implemented.

Another way to evaluate implementation is to consider the number of lines of code. This method has been used to evaluate the Pavane visualization system [26]. In the Pavane evaluation, the system was considered the better the fewer the required lines of code were. In our case, we can consider how many lines of code it takes to create the adapters or generators. The status

at the time of writing is shown in Table 9.1. As can be seen, the adapters typically require fewer lines of code. The main reason we see behind this is that there are many helper classes available for adapters, while the generators need to use whatever is available in the source system. The exception is `GaigsXML`→`XAAL` generator that is implemented using the XSLT approach. For comparison, the `XAAL`→`XAALXML` serializer is almost 1400 lines.

Table 9.1: The number of lines of code of the various adapters and generators implemented.

Adapter	LoC	Generator	LoC
<code>XAAL</code> → <code>JHAVÉ</code>	963	<code>ANIMAL</code> → <code>XAAL</code>	2580
<code>XAAL</code> → <code>Matrix</code>	418	<code>GaigsXML</code> → <code>XAAL</code>	241
<code>XAAL</code> → <code>ODF</code>	443	<code>Matrix</code> → <code>XAAL</code>	2923

Chapter 10

Algorithm Animations as Online Learning Material

As discussed in Section 3.2.3, merging algorithm animations into hypertext is an important topic in promoting animations in teaching. In addition, self-study has been reported to be the most typical usage scenario with online visualizations [72]. For these reasons, we introduced our approach to merge animations into hypertext.

Our solution for merging algorithm visualizations with hypertext for online learning is an AV viewer implemented using only HTML and JavaScript presented in Publication [P6]. The viewer has been implemented based on analyzing the requirements for algorithm animation systems in the literature. This literature and the requirements are introduced in the article while this chapter summarizes the main features.

Figure 10.1 shows the animation viewer in the Safari browser. In the figure, number 1 marks the surrounding HTML document. This document can contain any HTML. Number 2 shows the animation controls. Here, we have the controls to rewind and move backwards and forwards in the animation. Number 3 indicates the actual animation window where the contents of the animation are visualized. Number 4, in turn, indicates the settings panel for the animation viewer. Finally, number 5 marks the dynamic HTML documentation that is included in the XAAL document and shown next to the visualization. These parts, the main functionality they offer, and the technologies used will be briefly introduced in this chapter.

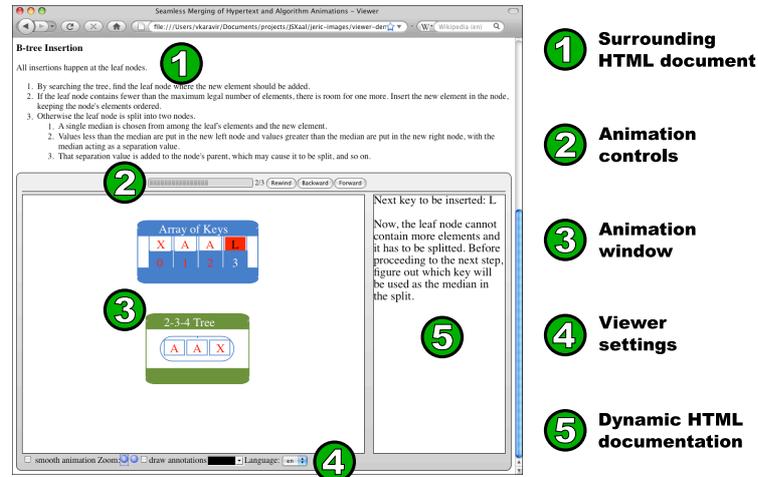


Figure 10.1: XAAL viewer in a browser showing the main parts of the animation viewer and related documentation. Texts are from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B-tree>.

10.1 Main Features

The most important feature is that adding the viewer to an HTML page is simple. After downloading the viewer¹, all it requires is a couple of lines of JavaScript code. However, there are plenty other features in the viewer implemented based on the requirements analysis.

Customizing the Viewer The customization features of the viewer can be roughly divided into two groups: customization that can be done by the end-user (*i.e.* the student) and done by the person who includes the viewer into the hypertext (*i.e.* content author, typically a teacher). Students can change options such as toggle smooth animation on or off, change the magnification by zooming in or out, and, if the animation is internationalized (the XAAL animation contains the textual content in multiple languages), change the language from the viewer. The teacher can change the appearance of the viewer and content shown by the viewer easily by modifying the default CSS stylesheet or by using a different CSS.

Integrating and Interacting with Hypertext Since the whole animation viewer is based on JavaScript and HTML, integration with hypertext is simple and

¹The viewer is open source and can be downloaded from <http://code.google.com/p/jsxaa1/>.

natural. Static documentation can be provided outside the viewer and each step in the animation is allowed to include a description that can be arbitrary XHTML, including JavaScript. Interaction from the HTML with the viewer is easy to achieve. This could be used, for example, to show a structural overview of the animation in HTML, and allow student to jump to some position in the animation by clicking the HTML link.

Student Engagement The viewer supports three kinds of user engagement:

- **Pop-up questions** Requiring users to respond to questions during the animation was another requirement for an AA viewer. The XAAL language and the viewer support typical question types such as multiple choice and multiple select questions as specified by the working group [119]. When showing the question, the animation cannot be moved backwards or forwards. When the student answers the question, feedback is given immediately and the answers to the questions are stored in the animation in the client's browser and can be submitted to a server.
- **Changing Input Data** Allowing users to specify their own input was one of the requirements. Again, since we are working with HTML and JavaScript, allowing this in the viewer is extremely simple in cases where the animation uses data structures. This is because all scripts included in the HTML document can interact with the animation viewer and thus with the data structures in the animation.
- **User Annotations** The users of the animation can add their own annotations to the animation. These can be drawn by selecting the annotation tool and color from the settings panel. Each step in the animation can contain an arbitrary number of annotations. The annotations are stored in the animation file and played back when moving in the animation.

If a teacher wants to store the student answers to the interactive questions, this can be done by adding a server-side back-end. Communication with a server requires the implementation of a simple JavaScript "interface". Thus, the viewer can be integrated with any server-side technology that can handle AJAX requests.

History View Showing past and previous steps can be done simply by writing one line of JavaScript when adding the animation into the HTML page. Any number of steps can be added arbitrarily far in the history or future. The title and scaling of the steps can also be specified. Another configuration option is the ability to specify a different input file for each view. This makes it possible to add multiple synchronized viewers that could, for example, add a display for a different sorting algorithm. Thus, a comparison of algorithms – a “*feature*” already available in Sorting out Sorting video [3] – is possible.

Importing/Exporting other formats Another requirement was to be able to view animations in several formats. Since modern web-browsers support XSLT processing [140], the viewer supports import from other formats through XSLT. This way any XML-based algorithm animation format that can be translated to XAAL can be viewed with the viewer. Currently this is implemented for the GaigsXML language [91]. Exporting the animations is currently not supported. However, single animation frames can be exported as Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) [141] in browsers that support SVG.

10.2 Underlying Technologies

The decision to implement the viewer in JavaScript was backed by many reasons. First, by using JavaScript we do not depend on commercial software provided by any corporation but we are using open source libraries. Second, JavaScript works on all platforms without any plugins, whereas, for example, Silverlight is not available on Linux at the time of writing. In addition, our approach can use any server side components. Finally and most importantly, for the JavaScript approach, the technology has come a long way since the 1990s and is mature, widely used, and supported by an ever-growing number of useful libraries. And, with the ongoing JavaScript engine performance war between TraceMonkey (used in future versions of Firefox), SquirrelFish (future versions of Safari) and V8 (Google Chrome) developers, JavaScript as a platform can only get better.

The implementation of the viewer is based on three JavaScript libraries. The lowest level of these libraries is Prototype², which offers, for example,

²<http://www.prototypejs.org/>

AJAX support as well as advanced features for dynamically manipulating the client-side HTML. The visualizations are drawn using Prototype Graphic Framework (PGF)³, a Prototype based framework that allows drawing arbitrary data on various browsers. PGF supports multiple rendering technologies for different browsers: Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG), HTML Canvas element, and Vector Markup Language (VML). These different renderers can be used through a single programming interface. The animation features in our viewer use Scriptaculous⁴, an animation framework based on Prototype. The animation is achieved by extending Scriptaculous's effects to modify graphical objects drawn using PGF.

When discussing web applications, the size of the files required is essential. The total size of the viewer and the required libraries is slightly over 400 kilobytes. This size can be reduced by minimizing the files. Then, the viewer will end up in loading approximately 200 kilobytes. Naturally, all of this can be cached by the browser and loaded only once.

³<http://prototype-graphic.xilinus.com/>

⁴<http://script.aculo.us/>

Chapter 11

Algorithm Animations as Lecture Material

It comes as no surprise that generic presentation tools such as Microsoft Powerpoint and Open Office Impress are often used by teachers to prepare lecture slides. Typically, algorithm animations are added to lecture slides. These presentation tools are easy to use and familiar to many teachers. However, *“the lack of support for specific data structures such as lists makes animation generation both awkward and time-consuming”* [114]. Furthermore, surveys show that demonstrations during classroom lectures are the most frequent use of visualizations by teachers [95] as well as considered the most beneficial by students [72].

These were our main motivations when deciding to find a solution to automating the generation of AAs as lecture material. Publication [P7] introduces our solution in detail, and in this chapter we will summarize the results.

11.1 First Prototype

Our first attempt at a prototype was introduced in [124]. The solution was based on a Java program generating graph descriptions in `dot` format. The graph descriptions were transformed to Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) using GraphViz [36]. The SVG files were then converted to Open Document Format (ODF) format using XSLT stylesheets. More specifically, the Java program generated example cases of the Kruskal’s algorithm.

The prototype solution was successful in showing that this kind of slide generation is possible to do. In addition, it was able to automatically generate questions as notes on the slides that a teacher can use to make lectures more interactive. However, the approach taken had several problems:

- The usage required third-party tools like GraphViz and Saxon to be installed. This makes it unlikely that teachers adopt it, since cumbersome installation is one of the reasons for not using visualization tools [109].
- The use of XSLT to generate the slides limits the applicability to simple cases due to the nature and limitations of XSLT.
- Most importantly, the approach supports no reuse of existing animations. As there are a number of animations in repositories for the existing systems, teachers should be able to benefit from those.

The last problem is directly related to the goal of this thesis to allow tool independent visualizations used in many systems. For this reason, we have continued the work by enabling the transformation of XAAL animations to lecture slides. This process will be introduced in the following section.

11.2 The Process of Generating Slides

We envisioned a process where the lecture slides could be generated directly from a visualization system. For this, ANIMAL with its collection of animation generators on various topics seemed a suitable choice. The final process is illustrated in Figure 11.1. The XAAL language implementation in ANIMAL is used to allow generation of XAAL animations using the existing ANIMAL generators. The resulting XAAL document is then transformed to lecture slides in ODF format. These slides can then be opened in OpenOffice Impress, as illustrated in Figure 11.2.



Figure 11.1: The process of generating lecture slides from ANIMAL through XAAL.

This solution provides an effortless way to create customized and customizable lecture animations. Customized in the sense that in ANIMAL, the generators can be configured (for example, change input data) using a graphical user interface. Customizable in the sense that the slides can be easily modified in Impress.

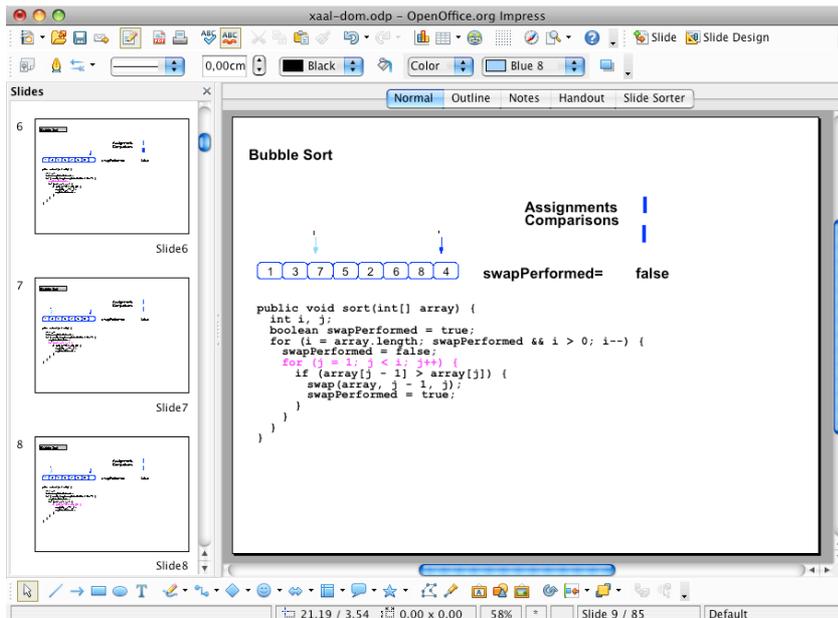


Figure 11.2: An example of an algorithm animation from the bubble sort generator in ANIMAL transformed to a set of Open Office Impress slides.

Although we did this using ANIMAL, there are no obstacles in using the same Xaal2ODF transformation to export lecture slides from, say MatrixPro. Hopefully, this will create easy enough option for many visualization system developers to include lecture slide generation on the feature list of their system.

Technically, the solution uses ODFDom library, a part of the ODF Toolkit¹. This library provides a Java API to create the different elements in the ODF document. It should be noted, that this same approach could be taken to generate slides for Microsoft PowerPoint using, for example, OpenXML4J library².

¹<http://odftoolkit.org/>

²<http://openxml4j.org/>

Part V

Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter 12

Discussion

In this chapter, we will summarize our work and address the research question “*How can we develop algorithm animations and AA systems further to better facilitate the creation and adoption of AA in education?*”. We start by revisiting the four sub-questions set in the introduction and discuss how they contribute to solving the research problem. We end this chapter with a critical overview of this work.

12.1 Research Questions Revisited

12.1.1 Effortless creation of AV

To make the algorithm animation production more effortless, we started researching what is effortless production. In the first step we identified that there are either specific, low effort systems or general, high effort systems [59]. This research was, however, only our subjective view of the subject. The next step was a survey targeting computer science educators [60]. The survey resulted in an initial set of measures for effortlessness. Finally, in Publication [P1] we introduced a taxonomy of effortless creation of algorithm animations and we now have knowledge of what makes an AV system effortless.

In the first step of the research on effortlessness, we found that Matrix [66] allowed effortless creation of animations. However, it was a research prototype demonstrating the features of the framework and not suitable for end-users. Thus, we developed a Matrix-based application, MatrixPro (see Publication [P2]). MatrixPro was designed to support *on-the-fly* demonstrations

without the need to prepare all the examples before lectures. The most important feature supporting this was the automatic animation of several ready made data structures, thus the system is effortless to use for the narrow scope it was designed, namely in math examples.

12.1.2 System independent description of AVI

To answer the question of how to develop a system independent description of algorithm visualization information (AVI), we first developed a taxonomy of algorithm animation languages presented in Publication [P3]. The taxonomy is based on the features of the existing algorithm animation languages.

Combining the work of a report of an international working group presented in Publication [P4] and the taxonomy, we designed a new animation language called XAAL (eXtensible Algorithm Animation Language). The use of these two elements as source ensured that the language is not designed from the view point of one system. Thus, what distinguishes XAAL from many of the existing AA languages is that it supports both of the two main approaches in the existing AA languages: graphical primitives and data structures. Thus, it is the first and only animation language at the moment that can be considered as a *complete visualization specification*.

Furthermore, the language has a modular design and consists of several XML Schemas. This makes it possible to use only parts of the language and to extend it. Finally, the language has already been used in mathematics outside of its intended scope of data structures and algorithm. We see this as an important indication of its suitability to algorithm animation.

12.1.3 Processes to use the AVI in AA systems

To support the usage of XAAL in existing algorithm animation systems, we have implemented a modular and extensible parser. In addition, we have implemented various adapters and generators between XAAL and other algorithm animation languages. The current selection of formats was presented in Figure 9.2 on page 73. As can be seen, AV systems that can be used to create XAAL animations are MatrixPro, ANIMAL, and JHAVÉ. In addition, we have a limited transformation from SVG to XAAL. XAAL documents can then be transformed to Open Document Format, ANIMALSCRIPT, JAWAA, and SVG,

viewed with a JHAVÉ visualization plugin, or opened in MatrixPro. Thus, we already have several different formats available for the same animation.

When considering the current implementation from the effortlessness point of view, we can say that we have made it possible to transform animations from an effortless system (MatrixPro) to a more general purpose tool (ANIMAL). This allows us, for example, to easily create an example of a complex topic, say B-Tree in MatrixPro, transform it to ANIMALSCRIPT and customize the animation with ANIMAL. In addition, as the JHAVÉ system is intended as a visualization platform, XAAL implementation for that platform is a good step towards more general tool integration.

In Section 9.2, we introduced two different processing pipelines to implement XAAL support: 1) parsing the XAAL document into a set of (Java) objects and transforming that, and 2) transforming the XAAL document using XSLT. A future challenge is to implement XAAL support and thus data exchange among more systems. Thus, the following considers the suitability of the two processing pipelines for the different visualization specification styles introduced in Section 3.2.4.

Topic-Specific Animation As topic-specific animations are not animation systems, it probably is not worth the effort to implement any data exchange with such animations.

Direct Manipulation Direct manipulation as a visual specification style can be implemented in a multitude of ways. Thus, it is not feasible to speculate how the data exchange with such a system could be implemented as it depends completely on the system architecture. For example, the XAAL import/export in MatrixPro is implemented by transforming an animation between the internal object hierarchy of Matrix and the XAAL object hierarchy.

API-based Generation In API-based generation there is some programming API that can be used to generate the animations. Thus, the natural method for implementing data exchange in such cases is to transform the Java object hierarchy to suitable method calls of the API.

Scripting-based Generation In scripting-based generation, the animation system has some scripting language (or, algorithm animation language) that it understands. Thus, using XSLT to transform XAAL documents

into this scripting language is the most sensible option. However, transforming the object hierarchy might be a useful solution as well, especially if there are significant differences between XAAL and the target language. When transforming an animation from the scripting language to XAAL, XSLT is a suitable solution if the scripting language is XML. Otherwise, it requires a parser of the scripting language.

Declarative Visualization In declarative visualization, the visualization is specified by declaring a mapping between a program state and a graphical representation. Generally, transforming between this mapping and XAAL is not a suitable approach, since XAAL does not have a *program* state attached. Thus, the best approach is again completely dependent on the system architecture.

Code Interpretation Implementing data exchange with a tool that uses code interpretation is not meaningful from XAAL to the system. The other way around it could be beneficial. However, the implementation depends completely on the architecture of the system.

From the discussion above, we can summarize that it is not obvious in most of the cases how the data exchange is best implemented. The best approach is typically dependent on the architecture of the animation system. However, in the case of API-based generation and Scripting-based generation, natural choices are transforming the Java object hierarchy and XSLT transformations, respectively. It should be noted, that often systems have more than one visualization specification style so there will be different possibilities to implement XAAL support as well.

12.1.4 Processing the AVI for different learning situations.

The last question was how to process the same animation for different learning situations. With the same source animation, the coherency of learning materials can be ensured.

Our goal was to support both hypertext materials and lecture slides. The seamless integration of XAAL animations into hypertext was presented in Chapter 10. This purely JavaScript and HTML based animation viewer offers better interaction between the hypertext and animation than any of the

existing AV systems. In Chapter 11, we introduced a process and tools to effortlessly create lecture slides from XAAL animations.

12.2 Critical Overview

Both of the taxonomies presented in this work can be criticized by claims of misplaced subcategories that should be under some other category. In addition, the labels of the categories are easy to pick on. For this, our defense is that all the categories arose from the data collected. Furthermore, no taxonomy can be correct and is always bound to be an objective interpretation of the topic. There are more than one way to create the characterization, ours being one way. The important point to consider is whether or not the taxonomy is suitable for the task, and we feel both of them are.

It would be easy to criticize the taxonomy of effortless creation of AV by stating that the categories do not measure the effort required to create an animation with a system. In a sense this is true and the taxonomy measures more like applicability. However, choosing the right tool that can be applied to the task at hand is important from the effortlessness point of view. As stated in Publication [P1], in the future the taxonomy should be extended to contain more categories. These should include topics like usability.

Similar criticism can be pointed towards the taxonomy of algorithm animation languages. Some features of the existing languages might require their own subcategory. However, we have included categories for the main features leaving out some of the most detailed ones. Furthermore, the taxonomy is intended to be extended in the future as it will be outdated at some point as AA languages are further developed.

The usefulness of the XAAL language itself can be questioned as well. Whether or not it is useful remains to be seen, but the large number of successful prototypes supports its applicability. In addition, having XAAL already incorporated in two other systems besides our MatrixPro is an indication of it being useful. Finally, we must mention that XAAL is the first implementation of a vision of a working group of AV system developers.

The number of other options is limited. The obvious one is to continue as before by having every system have its own AA language and, in some rare cases, make 1-to-1 mappings between languages. This means reinventing

the wheel by always starting from scratch. Other option would have been to develop further some of the existing languages. However, the working group consisting of many AV system developers made the decision to work towards a new language.

A more detailed question about XAAL asked by the careful reader could be: where are the abstract data structures? At its current state, the language has only basic data structures and the underlying data structure has to be specified as a property. This was a design choice at this point to limit the scope of this work, but in the future we see there being many data structures added as extensions.

What would we do now differently? For the graphical primitives specification of the working group, the choice of using SVG [141] to specify the graphical primitives could have been a more beneficial way. The choice of developing our own specification was taken perhaps too hastily. As Duval and Verbert state, *“the decision to develop a new standard[s] is sometimes taken too quickly and that, when possible, existing generic standards should be profiled”* [34]. Using SVG would have the benefit of having many people already familiar with the specification. However, the choice of using our own specification can be defended by the fact that we now have a consistent specification where all parts use the same conventions. Having, for example, the coordinates specified differently for graphical primitives than data structures would be confusing. Furthermore, the SVG specification is so extensive that an AA language would only need a fraction of its capabilities.

Another matter that, in hindsight, might have been solved differently is related to the status of the implemented tools. Currently, most of the tools are on prototype level. Thus, instead of trying out so many transformations, we might have benefited from concentrating on few and make them more complete and well documented. The clear benefit of trying out many different format transformations is that we now know XAAL is suitable for many different uses.

Where is the evaluation? The introduction of new educational tools typically requires an evaluation of whether or not they are useful for the learners, that is, are the learning results better with the tools than without them or with another tool. In our case, however, we have introduced enabling technology

to “do the old thing” – visualize algorithms – that can be used to more easily create visualization and merge them with online learning material and lecture material. Thus, we see that the results of the previous studies (see Chapter 3) gives guidelines on whether or not this is pedagogically sensible. In addition, we believe that the educational effectiveness of an algorithm visualization depends more on the content of the visualization than on the system used to view it.

Whether or not our solution better facilitates creation and adoption of AA in education remains to be seen. There is no way to evaluate the possible increase in usage of visualizations by teachers due to this work, although it would have been a suitable evaluation for this research.

The Bigger Problems with Dissemination There are still bigger problems in the dissemination of algorithm visualization tools. Most of the tools have been developed in a research project and end up being research prototypes. Typically, they add some new feature compared to the existing systems, or simply combine the tried and tested features. And most of the time the work is started from scratch instead of continuing the work by others. This has resulted in an increasing number of AV tools, making it difficult for teachers to choose the best tool for their need.

The nature of academic funding makes it difficult to get resources for polishing a research prototype to become a software product. When the funding for the project ends or the student working on the project graduates, the development of the tool often ends as well. Thus, many of the AV systems are not developed further after the required articles have been published. Clearly, there is a risk of that happening with the tools developed in this work as well.

Some of the successful education tools such as JFLAP [106] and BlueJ [5] come with a supporting book and resources for teachers. This help in integrating tools into teaching might be crucial in the dissemination of the tools. The lack of pedagogical guidelines in adopting the tools can possibly be explained that many of the AV tools are developed by software engineers instead of people with pedagogical background. Thus, a future challenge of this work is to create documentation on how to create pedagogically effective animations using XAAL and the related tools.

Chapter 13

Conclusions

We will conclude this work by summarizing the benefits of this work for three parties concerned: teachers, AV system developers, and students. Finally, we will introduce some future ideas and directions.

13.1 Benefits of This Work

In addition to discussing how this work has met the original goals, it is important to have some benefits for the possible end-users of the products of this work. The following subsections will discuss the benefits for three groups of end-users: teachers, AV system developers, and students.

Benefits for Teachers For teachers, we see clear benefits. With MatrixPro and ANIMAL generators, teachers can effortlessly create algorithm animations for the topics supported by the tools. The animations can then be included in slides to be used on lectures, a feature mentioned to be beneficial for both teachers and students. In addition, teachers can give the animations to students to work on outside of class, for example, by integrating them into hypertext learning materials with the tool presented in this work. Naturally, lecture slides and hypertext integration can be achieved from any of the systems that now (and in the future) support XAAL. Furthermore, the possibility to reuse visualizations is beneficial for teachers, since the technology presented here enables choosing from a wider range of ready-made visualizations for various AV systems.

Benefits for AV System Developers At the current state, we see AV system developers as the group benefiting most of this work. The taxonomy of AA languages can be used to compare the properties of existing AA languages and to get ideas for future directions of AA languages.

The XAAL language and the supporting tools provide a way to add import and export support of different formats into existing systems with manageable effort. These formats naturally include the lecture slide generation which can be a good way to promote an AV system. Furthermore, the XAAL animations can be used in hypertext, providing AV systems a way to integrate their animations in electronic learning material more seamlessly.

In the long run, having a common core that many authors contribute extensions would be an ideal situation. However, acceptance of XAAL needs marketing and promotion, as well as a more polished implementation of the tools. Still, having two AV systems other than the author's supporting XAAL is a good start to the right direction.

Benefits for Students Students are the end-users of educational materials such as algorithm animations. Hopefully, they are the ones who eventually benefit from this work. The way we see it, better lecture material for teachers will benefit the students. In addition, engaging online learning material using the JavaScript viewer can aid students learning the topics. However, the work presented here is mainly enabling technology, and it is up to teachers/visualizers to use and create high quality content that benefits the students.

13.2 Future Work

As can be seen in the evaluation of XAAL in the Section 8.2.1, it does not have all the necessary features at this point. We have numerous improvements and ideas for the future of the language, and here we will write down some of the most interesting ones. The most urgent requirement is naturally to finish the prototype implementation of the parser and the adapters and generators. This includes creating documentation for the language specification with rich examples. This would enable others to more easily use/implement the language.

The language itself could be extended to include programming concepts and thus allow the definition of algorithms and program visualization. This could be achieved, for example, by allowing o:XML¹ notation to be included in XAAL documents. Another alternative would be to allow JavaScript to be included into the document and offer DOM bindings for the different XAAL objects. Furthermore, the high-level data structures should be created as extensions to the language. Another direction for the language would be to specify light-weight variations of the language that could more easily be implemented by different tools. This approach has been taken, for example, with SVG by specifying SVG Tiny [143] for cellphones.

On a wider perspective, it would be good to see a community of visualization tool developers/visualizers working more together. Things that the community could develop include reusable modules for common features for AV systems to use. A good example of this is the AVInteraction package [116] that has been used in other systems as well. Other possible modules are, for example, graph drawing and animation information storing.

The last interesting future direction would be to get insight whether or not visualizations are so unused as AV system developers think. The existing usage surveys are over five years old. The question is, have the extensive efforts changed the situation? Collecting such data is always tricky. Some ways to do that would be to trace the usage of the AV systems by enabling, for example, automatic updates. Furthermore, a good repository with advanced search functionality, usage logging, and aggressive marketing would gain some insights into this. This is something the AlgoViz project² is already aiming at.

¹o:XML is an XML language for object-oriented programming, see <http://www.o-xml.org/>.

²<http://algoviz.org/>

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