

# Open Data Sources for 3D Data Visualisation

## *Generating 3D Worlds based on OpenStreetMaps Data*

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**Abstract:** Georeferenced data is becoming increasingly more available through open source licenses. In this paper, an approach is explained to build a real-time interactive 3D virtual world using the Unity 3D engine by using the freely available OpenStreetMaps data. This virtual environment can serve as a base for the visualisations of spatial and georeferenced data. By making use of OpenStreetMaps this virtual environment can be kept up to date with changes in the world. This paper provides an introduction to OpenStreetMaps, discusses some of the challenges and provides examples how to process this data in order to generate a virtual environment.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

OpenStreetMaps (OSM) data (OpenStreetMap, 2016) has the advantage of being a single data source which can provide information about any location on Earth. Users can edit the maps through different online tools available on the OSM website or standalone applications. The size of the database is continuously increasing (Stats - OpenStreetMap Wiki, 2016).

Various side projects have also emerged, which aim to improve the available map data in areas of need during emergencies or calamity situations. One of these is the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team project (Hotosm.org, 2016). Many other services and tools use the OSM data to provide routing information for GPS devices (Garmin.openstreetmap.nl, 2016) or smartphones (Osmand.net, 2016). OSM data is also used for offline visualisations such as city layout posters (Paologianfrancesco.com, 2016) and 3D tactile maps for people who are visually impaired (Kärkkäinen, 2016). Indeed, open and freely available map data allows the creation of many diverse applications.

This paper describes the results of a research project aimed at visualising spatial data in a virtual environment, which is based upon data provided by OpenStreetMaps. The origin of the visualised spatial data could come from output of model simulations, GIS data files or real-time data provided by online

data services. We started with the generation of a 3D world (Figure 1) based upon OSM data to create a solid base for adding other data sources, as well as creating a visual reference point when the spatial data is viewed. In order to create a realistic experience, the Unity (Unity, 2016) game engine version 5.4 is used.



Figure 1: Generated visualisation of the port of Rotterdam, Netherlands.

## 2 RELATED WORK

Various tools have been developed or are currently in development to visualise OSM data in 3D. Some tools generate their visualisations in a web browser such as F4Maps (F4map Demo - Interactive 3D map, 2016), Vizicities (UDST/vizicities, 2016) and OSMBuildings (Osmbuildings.github.io, 2016).

Other tools are standalone applications, such as *osm2world* (Knerl, 2016) and can save 3D model files, which in turn can serve as an input for other applications. All of these tools use the same OSM database as input, and have to process the data in order to generate the 3D worlds.

Few projects use a game engine to load OSM data. *ActionStreetMap* ([Actionstreetmap.github.io](https://github.com/ActionStreetMap/ActionStreetMap), 2016) generates 3D worlds in Unity and allows a player to walk through and interact with the map as well as saving a scene back to the OSM XML file format. It also features the ability of dynamic loading of world elements, which is not present in our own project.

### 3 ARCHITECTURE

OSM data can be downloaded from various websites. One way to acquire this data is by downloading a data extract based upon administrative borders such as countries, provinces and states ([download.geofabrik.de](https://download.geofabrik.de/), 2016). Another way is to perform an actual query to receive an extract of a data set. One such query language is the OSM Extended API (Xapi - [OpenStreetMap Wiki](https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Xapi), 2016), which was used in this project. Our query uses only the bounding box query option, as all data is potentially useful for 3D visualisation. Therefore the data of interest is extracted at a later step. The Xapi query language always returns the latest version of the dataset, previous versions of nodes (map elements) are not returned. The API returns files in the OSM XML format which can then be used by other software.

#### 3.1 Processing the Data

There are many tools that can operate on OSM files. A large single XML file is difficult to index for a real-time application, which is why additional pre-processing is required before we start generating world geometry. *OSMFilter* (*Osmfilter* - [OpenStreetMap Wiki](https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Osmfilter), 2016) is used to select the nodes that are interesting in the virtual environment: land use, buildings, waterways and infrastructure such as roads, railroads, high voltage towers and windmills. Some objects, such as windmills, have been selected for their generality. These objects are created as Unity prefabs that can easily be placed on the terrain and do not require extra processing. They add an extra dimension to the terrain as they are often landmarks in an area. After filtering, the command line application *ogr2ogr.exe* ([Gdal.org](https://gdal.org/),

2016) is used to convert the OSM XML file to a SQLite database. This will automatically categorise the sources of data in tables with the names equal to the type of data stored: *lines*, *multilinestrings*, *multipolygons* and *points*. Geometry data is stored in the Well Known Binary (WKB) format.

#### 3.2 Challenges of the OSM Data

Using OSM data does come with potential challenges when creating visualisations. Although the amount of data in the database is steadily growing, many areas in the world are still incomplete which can leave lots of gaps between buildings in cities. Aside from that, the actual nature of OSM has both pros and cons; everyone can edit the database after making a free account. The advantage of this is that changes in the real world are accounted for quickly in the database. Unfortunately it also means that data can be incomplete (Figure 2) or mapped incorrectly.



Figure 2: A city which is incompletely mapped. Tallahassee, USA.

Therefore, certain assumptions in visualisations need to be made. For example, some of the problems that have been noticed are nodes with a building tag which are part of storage underneath a bridge. Or small wind turbines placed on roofs which in the generated world become large turbines. This is a challenge that every 3D OSM visualisation must handle.

### 4 TERRAIN GENERATION

All terrain and objects are generated as triangles and use Unity's *Mesh* object to be rendered. In order to improve performance most of the geometry is marked as static geometry and aggregated as much as possible in one single mesh object.

In this project five elements have been marked as having significant influence for the visual representation of the terrain. These are: roads, trees, buildings, water surfaces and ground textures. Of course, there are many more man-made objects, some of which are tagged, but many of these do not add an extra sense of positional awareness on the average scale of our map; they are too small and far away to be seen.

#### 4.1 Terrain Mesh Creation

The terrain is generated using tiles based on the OSM zoom level 14 (Zoom levels - OpenStreetMap Wiki, 2016). This was an early design choice based upon the average expected zoom level of the world, a trade-off between required tiles and expected map detail. OSM tiles use a Cartesian coordinate system based upon EPSG:3857. The actual downloaded OSM data makes use of the EPSG:4326 (WGS84) coordinate system.

The elevation of the terrain is based upon the SRTMv3 (Shuttle Radar Topography Mission, 2016) global elevation map. This data is freely available and has accuracy from 30 to 90 meter depending on the area of interest.

All terrain related information is generated and rendered per tile using Maperitive (Maperitive.net, 2016). One single tile always represents an OSM tile at zoom level 14. Terrain is generated by building square geometry with a variable number of vertices.

Originally a 32x32 regular grid was used to build the terrain tiles. But in order to reduce triangle count, a simple method of Level of Detail (LOD) is implemented by making use of an error threshold to determine where to place the vertices. This technique is loosely based on existing algorithms (Garland and Heckbert, 1995). The threshold is configured to be a 15% difference in elevation between the last vertex and the vertex that is being processed. When the threshold is exceeded, a new vertex is inserted at the location and will serve as the new starting point for the next difference comparison. Every terrain tile is built using this algorithm (Figure 3). For convenience, however, all terrain tiles will have vertices inserted at the four corner points, such that these will always connect properly and also guarantees that later tile tessellation algorithms generate a square exactly the size of a single OSM tile.

For all the edges of the terrain we store the vertices in a list. We keep track of these as neighbouring terrain tiles will need to share the same vertices at the same location in order to prevent

seams from appearing at the mesh boundaries due to differences in the elevation.

Neighbouring tiles are quickly determined by using the OSM coordinates ( $x - 1$  or  $+1$  for horizontal neighbours,  $y - 1$  or  $y + 1$  for vertical neighbours).

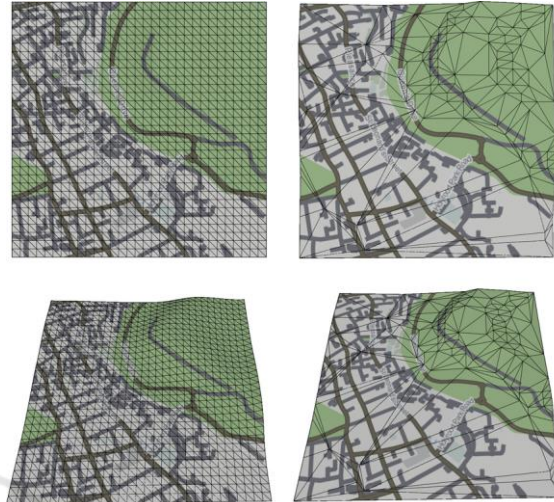


Figure 3: An unoptimised (left) and optimized (right) tile.

When the terrain geometry for a tile has been processed and all vertices have been created, the tessellation LibTessDotNet (speps/LibTessDotNet, 2016) library is used to create renderable triangles using Delaunay triangulation.

This process is repeated three times with different tolerance values in order to create meshes for the LOD system. The vertices at the mesh boundaries will always be kept the same, however. This allows for a seamless transition from one LOD level to another while preventing holes from appearing between the meshes in different LOD levels. The highest LOD level (with the most vertices) is used for this.

This algorithm results in geometry which has a lower polygon count in flat areas, while areas with a more diverse elevation will have a higher polygon count where detail is needed.

##### 4.1.1 Texture Generation

Terrain textures are generated using Maperitive. Maperitive reads the downloaded OSM file and can then render tiles in the OSM coordinate system, for different zoom levels. These tiles are generated with styling information based on rulesets which define the visual representation of elements on the map. Maperitive can be run headless (without user interface) to load large OSM XML files and is programmable with Python scripts.

After the tiles have been generated, the tool DXTCrunch (BinomialLLC/crunch, 2016) is used to optimize and reduce the memory footprint of the tiles as well as creating mip-maps in order to provide LOD for textures and reducing moiré effects. The files are saved in the compressed image format DXT1 which is common for use in game engines.

Alternatively an aerial map can serve as a base layer by providing a Web Mapping Service (WMS) for such tiles (Figure 4). This creates a better understanding of the terrain type and land cover. But it comes with the risk of being low in resolution or having colour differences between tiles due to different times of photography or cloud cover.



Figure 4: Difference between an aerial WMS layer and tile generated with Maperitive.

Additionally, georeferenced shapefiles can be loaded on top of the created geometry to visualise different kinds of data (Figure 5).



Figure 5: City of Colombo, Sri Lanka with the May 2016 flood extend map added (data courtesy of Survey Department of Sri Lanka).

#### 4.1.2 Mesh Colliders

The default “mesh colliders” of Unity are used to build a collision mesh for the generated terrain tiles. These can be used to perform hit detection using ray casting techniques. Raycasts are used to position certain objects (trees, roads) exactly on the terrain, such that they do not float above the terrain.

All LOD levels share the collider of the highest and most accurate LOD level. This could lead to some floating objects on the terrain, but only when these object are so far away from the camera that

such errors are practically invisible. When the user gets closer to the terrain objects, the terrain will be shown in the highest LOD level and therefore objects should match with the terrain.

## 4.2 Building Generation

The building data that OSM contains is most of the time a “floor plan”. So only the vertices are provided that composes the outline of the building.

Before buildings are generated, some pre-processing scripts using the GDAL libraries (Gdal.org, 2016) are used to clip the buildings that belong to a certain tile. The tile’s x-y coordinates are stored for each row in the database to make it easy to query.

Buildings are generated for each tile rather than as one big mesh. The latter would make it impossible to load data dynamically depending on the camera frustum position. Currently these tiles are not loaded on demand yet, which is a feature that is planned for the future. Using tiles the rendering can also effectively cull buildings that are not visible to the camera. If it were just multiple large meshes covering the whole terrain area, one building could trigger the rendering of thousands of other buildings, therefore increasing the number of rendered triangles.

Some buildings have additional information such as height (height of the building), number of floors and minimum height (distance from the ground). A single building can be made of several parts. In this case the OSM attribute *building:part* will be set to “yes”. Combined with the attribute *min\_height*, this is a powerful option to create buildings which are more than just an extruded floor plan, as building parts can be stacked on top of each other (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Euromast tower in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It consists of multiple geometry elements using the “building:part=yes” tag.

If the height of the building is available, this information is used directly in order to extrude the mesh. Otherwise, when the number of floors is

known, the “formula for calculating the height of a ‘mixed-use’ or ‘function unknown’ tall building” (Ctbuh.org, 2016) is used to determine building height. When none of these are available, a default height of 6 meters is used.

To generate 3D buildings several steps need to be performed. The building information is already stored per OSM tile in an earlier step. To make culling of buildings straightforward, all buildings are attached to the tile on which they are standing. For each tile we execute the following steps:

```
Query SQLiteDB for buildings of tile
For each building in tile
  Merge adjacent vertices to remove
  building walls

  Tessellate outline to triangles

  Copy outline and elevate by building
  height to create ceiling

  Build walls between floor and
  ceiling
```

Boundary information is returned by the tessellation library, which we use to build the “roof” of the 3D building. This is a copy of all floor plan vertices where the y component has been increased by either the calculated height or a fixed default height value.

Then we generate the walls by looping through the edges of the buildings and generating triangles for each inner or outer edge.

All these generated vertices are added to the meshbuilder class which will automatically build meshes taking into account Unity’s maximum vertex limit of  $2^{16}$  (65536) vertices into account.

Each building has a white diffuse colour. OSM data sometimes contains wall colour information but this is not so common. Therefore it was decided to proceed with a uniform colour approach, while skipping efforts to texture buildings with a collection of premade wall textures.

#### 4.2.1 Fixed Model Buildings

A number of buildings are not dynamically generated. Often buildings or structures are described by a point object (feature) instead of a polygon and therefore do not have the necessary information to generate a 3D model.

In this case some prebuilt meshes are used. For example, for objects such as: high voltage towers, windmills and wind turbines. Occasionally more information is available for an object: the type of high voltage tower (Tag:power=tower, -

OpenStreetMap Wiki, 2016) or the blade diameter of a wind turbine (Tag:generator:source=wind - OpenStreetMap Wiki, 2016). With this information, it is possible to select a 3D mesh from a library of prebuilt 3D meshes. Currently in this project only one pre-made mesh is used per recognized point object.

### 4.3 Trees and Forested Areas

Tree placement in this application takes three types of OSM data sources into account. The land use type *landuse=forest* is used for random tree placement while sometimes an actual single tree is defined (*natural=tree*) or a row of trees (*natural=tree\_row*).

#### 4.3.1 Forest Areas

The land use type *forest* is used to randomly place trees in a specified area. No trees should be generated outside these areas. Therefore a tree placing algorithm has been implemented. Polygons in this algorithm are created using the LibTessDotNet library which also takes care of holes in the geometry.

```
For each polygon of natural type forest
```

```
  Tessellate to a 2D mesh using the
  polygon outline
  Calculate expected tree count
  Begin loop for expected tree count
    Choose random triangle of polygon
```

```
  Get random point in selected
  triangle by using barycentric
  coordinates
```

```
  Determine if there is already a
  tree at the given random location
  using a radius test
```

```
  If no tree nearby
    Place tree and continue
  Else
    Try another random location up
    to three times.
    If no acceptable location is
    found, skip tree and continue.
```

The maximum number of trees that are placed per polygon is calculated using the area of a polygon multiplied with a tree density factor. A density of 1.0 means that there will be one tree per square unit of the polygon. An absolute maximum regardless of polygon size ensures that very large polygons will not generate thousands of trees.

### 4.3.2 Reducing Uniformity of Trees

The vertices of trees are modified by a randomiser function to give each tree more of an individual and unique look (Figure 7). First, the size is uniformly modified using a scale of 0.9 – 1.1 times the actual size. Therefore, all the trees vary in size. Secondly, the rotation of the tree is changed. Rotation of the x-axis is from 0 to 360 degrees and on the y- and z-axis the angle is between -2 and 2 degrees to make sure that trees are not all pointing upwards and perfectly straight. Finally, all trees have some colour variation applied by using vertex colours. For each tree a random greyscale colour is determined (between RGB 100 to 255), which is then applied to all the tree vertices. The trees are then added to the meshbuilder class which will again make sure that meshes are split when reaching Unity’s mesh limit, similar to the construction of buildings. The trees object will become a child of the terrain tile in order to perform efficient frustum culling. When the tile becomes invisible to the camera, so will all the trees on top of it.

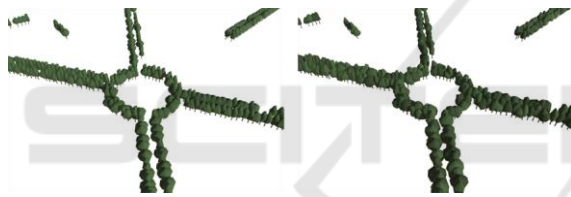


Figure 7: Trees without variation (left) and with (right).

When rendering, the fragment shader will multiply the tree’s texture colour with the vertex colour, giving each tree a different colour. All these steps combined lead to a tree placement system which creates diverse forests, while keeping the rendering batches intact. This means that there is no performance loss for having many randomised trees compared to non-randomised trees.

### 4.3.3 Level of Detail for Trees

Unity’s own LOD system is used to reduce the number of triangles rendered for trees that are far away. A LOD system tries to lower the number of rendered triangles by replacing detailed meshes with meshes that have a lower polygon count. These systems work, using the fact that in perspective views, objects become smaller when distance to the camera is increased. With properly setup LOD levels, it is unlikely for the user to notice the changing geometry.

For each tree type, three different meshes have been created in 3D modelling software: A normal

“base” tree and two types of low-polygon meshes based upon the base tree (Figure 8).

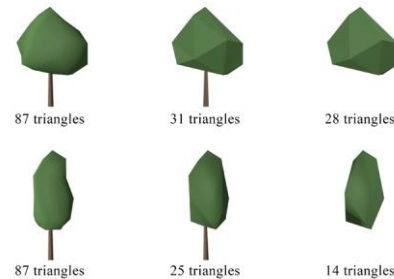


Figure 8: Two types of trees and their three LOD levels.

The simplified trees are made like this to prevent “popping” of the geometry. Three meshbuilder classes are used simultaneously to generate the LOD meshes. Each tree that is placed inside the first LOD (high detail) meshbuilder is also automatically added to the other two mesh builders. This will immediately create the meshes for the medium and low-polygon trees. Unity’s LODGroup component is then added to this object so that Unity can automatically determine when to render which mesh at what distance.

## 4.4 Infrastructure

Various types of infrastructure are visualised as well: Most types of car roads and railways are visualised. The 3D models of the roads are generated using the linestrings that are available from the OSM data. OSM provides many categories for these. The data is specifically filtered as follows: *‘unclassified’, ‘motorway\_link’, ‘road’, ‘motorway’, ‘trunk\_link’, ‘primary\_link’, ‘service’, ‘secondary\_link’, ‘tertiary\_link’, ‘primary’, ‘secondary’, ‘tertiary’* and *‘residential’*. Some categories are currently skipped (e.g. trails) because they are rather small and do not add significant detail to the virtual world. They might be visible on the ground layer tiles.

An important aspect of roads that requires attention is multiple layered roads such as intersections, tunnels and bridges. OSM data has a solution for objects which share the same x-y coordinates but not elevation. The attribute *layer* makes it possible to distinguish these. This way 3D roads can be constructed which are layered on top of each other or join two different levels together, such as intersection junctions.

The default width of the roads is 5 meters. Additionally, width is calculated when properties are available such as the number of lanes or if an actual

width has been set. The width of a single lane is currently configured to be 3.5 meters. This number varies internationally, however. The road meshes are generated by using a quadratic Bézier curve algorithm. Corners become rather angular when road sections are drawn straight from point to point. These quadratic curves provide much smoother and more realistic representation of the roads (Figure 9).

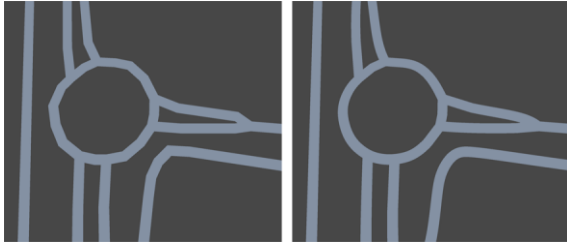


Figure 9: Top-down view of point to point roads (left) and quadratic curves (right).

#### 4.5 Water Surfaces

Various sources of water surfaces can be found in OSM data; these are of the type *multipolygon* in the earlier generated SQLite database. OSM data has many classifications of water types (e.g. *rivers*, *lakes*, *canals*, etc.). These polygons are tessellated directly without additional processing. One aspect that has to be considered is that some water surfaces such as oceans might not be mapped in OSM as polygons. Rather, their coastlines have been mapped. Datasets which contain these as polygons can be downloaded freely (Openstreetmapdata.com, 2016). Texture mapping of these water surfaces is based upon their absolute position in the virtual world. A variation of flow maps (Vlachos, 2010) gives these surfaces more water-like dynamics. Normal implementations of the flow maps commonly use textures for velocities of the water.

But in our water surfaces vertex colours are used instead, as there is no need for high resolution flowing water, while also reducing the memory footprint for each surface. In order to make sure there are no unexpected colour changes in the water, the polygons do not share their vertices and every triangle has unique vertices.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper covered an approach to generate a 3D virtual world based upon OSM data (Figure 10). Various approaches have been shown that were used

to generate terrain tiles, perform tree placement, create infrastructure of roads and railways, plus generating polygons of water surfaces.

There is still room for improvement by implementing various other techniques for generating efficient geometry. Recent versions of Unity support GPU instancing. This creates opportunities in displaying massive amounts of geometry, such as trees, without having an enormous performance impact. Recent DirectX versions support dynamic tessellation which allows the creation of details on the vertex shader itself without having to generate additional vertices on the CPU side.

Another improvement would be to generate geometry on the fly instead of only once during start up. Dynamic creation of tiles makes it possible to explore any place in the world without running into potential memory issues, as well as reducing loading times at the start of the virtual environment.

Batching of terrain tiles could be further optimized by making use of texture atlases. A single 4096x4096 pixels texture can fit up to 16x16 terrain textures. This would reduce the number of draw calls by a factor of 256. Care needs to be taken regarding the mip-mapping of these texture atlases as border pixels might bleed to the texture of neighbouring tiles. It is very likely that some of the pre-processing can be skipped by making use of the OSM Spatialite-tools (Gaia-gis.it, 2016). These tools create a SQLite database with spatial extensions which provide a fast way to query geometry from the database. As well as keeping OSM node references, which potentially allows better merging of geometry.



Figure 10: Visualisation of Hamburg, Germany.

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