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Jad Bassil, Abdallah Makhoul, Benoit Piranda, Julien Bourgeois. Distributed Size-constrained Clustering Algorithm for Modular Robot-based Programmable Matter. *ACM Transactions on Autonomous and Adaptive Systems*, 2023, 18 (1), pp.21. 10.1145/3580282 . hal-04257318

**HAL Id: hal-04257318**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04257318v1>**

Submitted on 25 Oct 2023

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# Distributed Size-Constrained Clustering Algorithm for Modular Robot-based Programmable Matter

JAD BASSIL, ABDALLAH MAKHOUL, BENOÎT PIRANDA, and JULIEN BOURGEOIS, Univ. Bourgogne Franche-Comté, FEMTO-ST Institute, CNRS, France

Modular robots are defined as autonomous kinematic machines with variable morphology. They are composed of several thousands or even millions of modules which are able to coordinate in order to behave intelligently. Clustering the modules in modular robots has many benefits, including scalability, energy-efficiency, reducing communication delay and improving the self-reconfiguration process that focuses on finding a sequence of reconfiguration actions to convert robots from an initial shape to a goal one. The main idea of clustering is to divide the modules in an initial shape into a number of groups based on the final goal shape in order to enhance the self-reconfiguration process by allowing clusters to reconfigure in parallel. In this work, we prove that the size-constrained clustering problem is NP-complete and we propose a new tree-based size-constrained clustering algorithm called "SC-Clust". The idea is to divide a network into a predefined number of clusters constrained by a given number of modules in each cluster based on the final goal shape. The result is an efficient algorithm that scales to large modular robot systems. To show the efficiency of our approach, we implement and demonstrate our algorithm in simulation on networks of up to 30,000 modules and on the *Blinky Blocks* hardware with up to 144 modules.

CCS Concepts: • Theory of computation → Distributed algorithms; • Computer systems organization → Robotics.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: programmable matter, modular robots, clustering algorithms, distributed algorithms

## ACM Reference Format:

Jad Bassil, Abdallah Makhoul, Benoît Piranda, and Julien Bourgeois. 2022. Distributed Size-Constrained Clustering Algorithm for Modular Robot-based Programmable Matter. 1, 1 (September 2022), 23 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1122445.1122456>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Programmable matter is matter that can be programmed to change its physical properties on demand or due to internal or external events [32]. It can be achieved using modular self-reconfigurable robots (MSR) composed of thousands or millions of homogeneous micro-modules. The shape of the micro-modules differs depending on the modular robotic system used. They can communicate by exchanging messages and move around each other to reconfigure from their initial shape to a goal one in order to adapt to their task-environment, accommodate different conditions and cover failure. Figure 1 shows a self-reconfiguration example of an initial mug shape made of tiny spherical modules into a goal plate shape. Such matter can have many applications and can be deployed in a large variety of domains including surgery, space exploration, environmental science, construction, etc [4, 61]. Examples of future applications include

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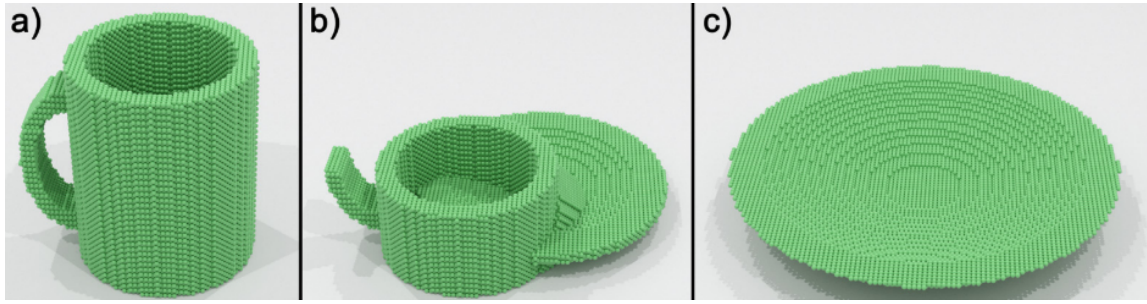


Fig. 1. A self-reconfiguration of a programmable matter made with tiny spherical modules [58]. a) initial configuration. b) intermediate configuration during self-reconfiguration. c) goal configuration.

delivering drugs in the human body, monitoring hostile environments, educational robots, new sets of robotics toys, etc [4, 13, 50].

Planning for self-reconfiguration **which consists of finding the sequences of movements to be carried out by the modules to change the shape of the MSR** is a difficult process. The number of possible configurations increases exponentially when the number of modules in the system increases. **The self-reconfiguration planning problem** has been shown and proven to be NP-complete for chain-type MSR **where modules are arranged in a chain** and is expected to be at least NP-complete for lattice MSR [58] **where modules are arranged in a regular lattice structure**. Therefore, the self-reconfiguration problem stands as a major challenge for achieving programmable matter. Clustering the modular robot can help reduce the search space thus **enhancing** the self-reconfiguration process. Accomplishing tasks in cluster-based approaches allows parallelization and increases the efficiency in terms of execution time, communication load and energy consumption. In fact, a cluster head (CH) will be designated in each cluster to schedule tasks and activities in its cluster and to coordinate intra-clusters operations with other CHs. Cluster's members will only communicate with their CH reducing the communication scope to inter-cluster only thus avoiding passing of redundant messages.

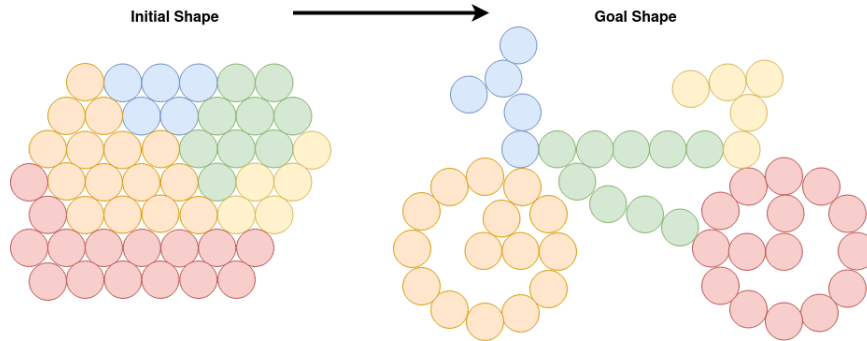


Fig. 2. Clustering motivation

Figure 2 shows the benefit that clustering can yield to the self-reconfiguration process. The modules in the initial shape are clustered into 5 clusters with sizes chosen according to the goal shape. The formed clusters can then reconfigure in parallel to form their corresponding part of the goal shape thus, reducing the time and communication required for transforming the configuration from the initial shape to the goal one. **For instance, in [40], the authors proposed a**

cluster-based self-reconfiguration algorithm where clusters of modules in the initial shape reconfigure in parallel to form the goal shape. To show the advantage that clustering can yield to self-reconfiguration, they compared the execution time and communication load while varying the number of clusters. The results showed that both the execution time and the number of exchanged messages decrease by a factor of  $k$  where  $k$  is the number of clusters. However, they suppose that the clusters are given initially and do not propose a clustering method.

Our objective is to propose an efficient distributed clustering algorithm to partition the modules in the initial shape given the number of clusters and the size of each cluster according to the goal shape in order to enhance the self-reconfiguration process. A tree-based density-cut algorithm was proposed in [6] for the same purpose. However, it resulted in arbitrary sized clusters so, we aim to **propose a new algorithm** to control the number of modules in each cluster which is crucial for self-reconfiguration since a cluster of modules in the initial shape needs to reconfigure into a specific part of the goal shape requiring a fixed number of modules.

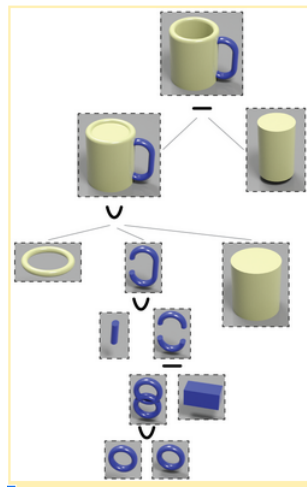


Fig. 3. A mug represented in CSG tree

Prior to self-reconfiguring, modules can be assembled randomly so they are not aware of their initial configuration. But, an efficient encoding of the goal configuration is required for self-reconfiguration since a module needs to know its position according to the goal map. A solution based on Constructive Solid Geometry (CSG)[52] is proposed in [60]. It can be used to determine the number and sizes of clusters. It defines the goal shape as a tree made of basic geometrical objects and transformations (union, intersection, difference) that when combined form the final scene as shown in Figure 3. First, the 3D object to be formed is discretized and encoded into the CSG tree via centralized computations. During this process, the number of clusters and the size of each cluster can also be calculated according to the goal shape. Then, the CSG tree can be transmitted along with the number of clusters and clusters' sizes to a master module to be then flooded and stored in all modules.

In this paper, we present **SC-Clust**, a distributed algorithm that partition the modules of a modular robot in a predefined number of clusters with predefined cluster sizes. This paper is organized as follow. Section 2 presents the size-constrained clustering problem and lists the system assumptions. Section 3 gives an overview of the related works existing in the literature. In section 4, our proposed solution, the SC-Clust algorithm is described. Section 5 gives a

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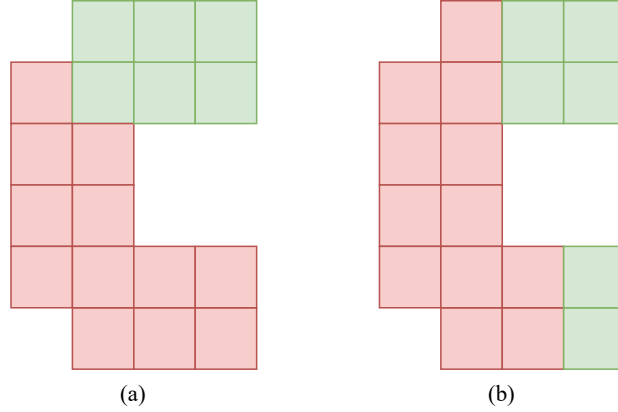


Fig. 4. An example of two possible size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning where  $k = 2$ ,  $s_1 = 12$  (Red) and  $s_2 = 6$  (Green). (a) shows a correct size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning. (b) shows an incorrect size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning because the second partition shown in green is disconnected.

complexity analysis in terms of communication load and execution time. Section 6 shows the conducted simulations and evaluates the performance of the SC-Clust algorithm in terms of execution time and communication load on different configurations and cluster distributions. In section 7, we conclude this paper and mention the intended future works.

## 2 PROBLEM DEFINITION AND SYSTEM ASSUMPTIONS

The modular robot ensemble can be modeled as an undirected graph  $G(V, E, W)$  where  $V$  represents the set of modules,  $E$  represents the set of edges such that for each pair of modules  $(u, v) \in V^2$ ,  $e(u, v) \in E$  denotes a connection between  $u$  and  $v$ . Therefore, two nodes  $u$  and  $v$  are neighbors if  $\exists e(u, v) \in E$ . For each edge  $e \in E$ , a non-negative weight  $w \in W$  is associated,  $w : E \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^{+*}$ .

Modules are homogeneous, placed in a regular lattice and they are attached border-to-border. Since they can only communicate with their direct connected neighbors in their adjacent cells, they form a sparse communication graph with large network diameter [43].

**Definition 1. Size-constrained partition:** A size-constrained partition  $G_i(V_i, E_i, W_i)$  is a connected sub-graph of  $G$  that have a predefined number of nodes  $s_i$  i.e.  $|V_i| = s_i$ .

**Definition 2. Size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning:** partitions the graph  $G$  into  $k$  size-constrained partitions (Definition 1) such as:

- (1) Partitions are exhaustive, each node must belong to a partition:  $V_1 \cup V_2 \cup \dots \cup V_k = V$
- (2) Each node belongs to only one partition, such as:  $\forall i \neq j, V_i \cap V_j = \emptyset$
- (3) The size of each size-constrained partition  $G_i$  is predefined before partitioning, such as,  $\sum_{i=1}^k s_i = |V|$

Figure 4 (a) shows a correct size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning. Figure 4 (b) shows an incorrect solution since the green cluster is disconnected. The objective of this work is to propose a distributed algorithm that clusters the modular robot ensemble into  $k$  clusters by performing size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning (Definition 2) on  $G$  given the number of partitions  $k$  and the desired size of each partition  $s_i$  and considering the following assumptions:

- The goal shape is known and can be efficiently encoded and stored in each module, as explained in [60].
- Each module is identified by a unique number (ID).
- Modules are placed in the cells of a regular 3D lattice and they store locally their coordinates and orientation.
- Only neighbor-to-neighbor communications are possible. A module may send a message to its adjacent neighbors through one of its connectors. The receiver can respond by sending a message through the connector that received the message.
- No global view of the modular robot network is available. The view of each module is limited to its direct neighborhood. Modules perform their computations locally, and they can only access local information in their neighborhood via message-passing.
- A module is aware of its direct connections (i.e., which borders are connected to other modules and which ones are not).
- We consider the configuration to be fixed and always connected during the process, that is, no new modules are connected or disconnected during the execution of the algorithm.

### 2.1 Size-constrained $k$ -partitioning is NP-complete

In this section, we first define the  $k$ -balanced clustering problem and then prove that the size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning problem is NP-complete. To do so, we prove that it is NP-hard by restriction from the  $k$ -balanced clustering problem. NP-completeness follows since it is simple to verify a given solution with a linear algorithm.

#### Definition 3. $k$ -balanced clustering Problem:

**INSTANCE:** A connected lattice graph  $G(V, E)$  the number of wanted clusters  $k$ .

**QUESTION:** Does there exist  $k$  equal sized partitions  $V_1, \dots, V_k$  such that  $|V_i| = \frac{|V|}{k}$ ,  $V_1 \cup V_2 \cup \dots \cup V_k = V$  and  $\forall i \neq j, V_i \cap V_j = \emptyset$ ?

The  $k$ -balanced partitioning problem defined in Definition 3 is proved to be NP-hard on 2D lattice graphs by reduction from Hamiltonian path in [7] and 3-partition in [20]. The size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning problem contains the  $k$ -balanced clustering problem as a special case where all clusters are equal in size. Therefore, by restriction [22], the size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning problem is NP-hard on 2D lattice graphs and therefore, it is at least NP-hard on 3D lattice graphs representing module connections in lattice-based modular robots.

## 3 RELATED WORKS

The problem we consider is related to graph clustering or graph partitioning. The graph partitioning problem has been widely studied in the literature and it is known to be a NP-hard problem [1, 11, 54]. Existing graph partitioning methods rely on two search techniques: global and local. They aim to partition a given graph into  $k$  disjoint balanced dense partitions. Global search algorithms work on the entire graph to find a direct solution. They include solutions based on linear programming [19, 26], spectral clustering [28, 33, 35] and geometrical clustering [5, 23, 57]. Local search algorithms use heuristic and metaheuristic methods to iteratively improve an initial solution based on an optimization function. They use techniques such as node swapping [44], tabu search [53], random walk [64], graph growing [15, 49], genetic algorithms [31], multilevel approach [38, 39] ... The aforementioned methods are used for graph structured data and are not suitable for modular robots, as they require global knowledge of the graph.

Capacitated clustering problem (CCP) [42] is a problem closely related to the graph partitioning problem. Its objective is to partition the weighted nodes of a graph into a set of disjoint clusters where the sum of the nodes' weights in

261 each cluster is constrained by an upper and lower capacity limit while maximizing the edges' weights of each cluster.  
262 Existing CCP solutions use centralized heuristic approaches [24, 34, 55, 66]. For example, in [66], two heuristics are used:  
263 tabu search and mimetic algorithms. They can be applied to find size-constrained partitions but they require global  
264 knowledge of the graph and do not scale to thousands of resource constrained modules since they require thousands of  
265 iterations to find an acceptable solution.  
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267 Distributed partitioning methods were developed to overcome the high computation cost when the graph size  
268 becomes very large. The distributed partitioning model distributes the partitioning task across a network of computers.  
269 For example, in [51] the author proposed JA-BE-JA, a fully distributed iterative method that can find balanced partitions  
270 while reducing the number of cut-edges using local search and simulated annealing. It requires thousands of iterations  
271 and uses multi-start strategies to converge towards an optimal solution resulting in a huge communication load,  
272 especially in a sparse graph such as the one representing modules connections. In a more recent work, Adoni et  
273 al. presented DHPV [2], a distributed algorithm that outperforms JA-BE-JA. It is more suitable to the master-slave  
274 distributed architecture where a master node coordinates the partitioning process and the partitioning task is distributed  
275 to slave nodes that operates in parallel to add a new vertex to their partition's subgraph. These methods are suitable for  
276 balanced partitioning of graph structured data and can't be applied to distributedly partition the modules of a modular  
277 robot with communication limited to neighbor-to-neighbor and no centralized global control.  
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280 The multi-robot task allocation problem [30] is about assigning a group of robots to a set of tasks in the most  
281 optimal way based on a utility function. The utility function measures how well a robot can perform a task. Some  
282 tasks require multiple homogeneous robots or heterogeneous robots with different capabilities to be accomplished. So,  
283 robots are partitioned to form  $k$  coalitions based on the utility function. Then, tasks are assigned to coalitions to be  
284 executed simultaneously [18, 37, 65]. The problem we are tackling in this paper is different from the multi-robot task  
285 allocation problem since we consider the partitioning problem independently of the task to be performed which is the  
286 self-reconfiguration. Therefore, these methods are not applicable to solve our problem.  
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289 Partitioning the set of modules for configuration generation in modular robots has been studied in [16, 17]. In [16], an  
290 algorithm based on a coalition search graph is proposed for partitioning a set of modules. It aims for an efficient shape  
291 configuration of scattered modules by partitioning-based coalition formation constrained by the maximum number of  
292 modules required to form the configuration. It finds the best coalition structure of separated modules based on a utility  
293 function. The modules forming a coalition are then docked together to form the goal configuration. Another method for  
294 the same purpose is proposed in [17] where a minimum spanning tree is built to minimize docking cost. Then, the best  
295 coalition or configuration is found by partitioning the built tree taking into consideration the size, communication and  
296 battery constraints. These methods focus on configuring small sets of separated modules scattered in their environment.  
297 Hence, they are not applicable to solve our problem.  
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300 Clustering has been studied for robotic swarms. The purpose is to split the swarm into clusters for pattern formation  
301 and for better problem solving efficiency by dividing the problem into sub-problems and allocating different tasks to  
302 each cluster. Mostly, the existing methods rely on robot mobility directed by external stimuli in the environment, so they  
303 are not suitable for modular robot's based programmable matter, to cite a few [27, 29, 47, 62]. Other methods based on  
304 token clustering were proposed. In [12], a fully distributed algorithm is proposed based on consensus and load balancing  
305 to partition the robots with wireless communication into two spatially separated clusters. Then it was extended in [10]  
306 to spatially partition the set of robots into multiple clusters. However, the experimental results show that the time  
307 required for convergence is high for a small number of robots and a small number of clusters. The experiments showed  
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Table 1. Comparative table.

Work	distributed	local knowledge	size-constraint
Global Search[5, 26, 28, 31, 33, 38]	×	×	×
Local Search[44, 49, 53, 64]	×	✓	×
CCP [24, 34, 42, 55, 66]	×	×	✓
Distributed Methods[2, 51]	✓	✓	×
SWARM clustering [10]	✓	✓	×
WSN clustering [8, 41, 46, 63]	✓	✓	×
DCut [6]	✓	✓	×
SC_Clust	✓	✓	✓

that it can take minutes to cluster 20 robots into 4 classes. The convergence time is expected to increase immensely for large scale modular robots with communication limited to neighbor-to-neighbor.

Clustering for wireless sensor networks (WSN) and mobile ad-hoc networks is related to our problem in which sensors are grouped into clusters to achieve network scalability by creating a hierarchical structure. For each cluster, a cluster-head (CH) plays significant roles such as scheduling tasks and aggregating and relaying data generated by its cluster members to limit inter-clusters communications to CHs only thus reducing communication load [3]. Many clustering algorithms have been proposed for WSN [8, 41, 46, 63] but they are not suitable to modular robots due to their specific constraints which make them inapplicable on modular robots: wireless communication, existence of a base station, pre-election of cluster heads...

In [6] we proposed a fully distributed and adapted version of the DCut algorithm originally proposed by Shao et al. (2018) [56] in the context of modular robots.

It takes into consideration the geometrical aspect of the ensemble and captures the density between adjacent modules locally using Jaccard Coefficient. The idea is to build a density-connected tree (DCT) that captures the topological similarities between modules relative to fixed points on the extremities of the geometry bounding box. Since the DCT forms an acyclic graph, an edge connects two partitions. So, instead of partitioning the whole graph representing all connections between modules, it partitions the DCT by recursively finding and removing cut edges until  $k$  clusters are obtained. It creates a spanning-tree which can be used in tasks such as inter-cluster communication, intra-cluster communication, data aggregation, moving modules from one cluster to another, etc. Furthermore, it is distributed and efficient. However, it does not take into consideration the size-constraint which is crucial for transforming clusters of the initial shape to specific parts of the goal shape requiring a fixed number of modules.

The existing work aforementioned in this section fails to satisfy the requirements to solve the size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning problem for modular robots described in Section 2. The solution must be distributed, based on the limited local knowledge of each module about its neighborhood, and satisfies the size-constraint. Therefore, in this work we present SC-Clust, a distributed solution for the size-constrained  $k$ -partitioning problem for modular robots that uses the local knowledge of modules to cluster the ensemble. Table 1 shows which requirements are met by the existing solutions. We excluded from the table the above-mentioned solutions for the multi-robot task allocation problem and the configuration generation problem because partitioning is not their primary focus and they address a different problem than ours.



## 4 ALGORITHM DESCRIPTION

In this section, we propose the SC-Clust algorithm, a solution to the size-constrained clustering for lattice graphs representing module connections in modular robots. It identifies  $k$  size-constrained partitions in  $O(n \log n)$  time and communication complexity. The SC-Clust algorithm operates in three phases. **First, we define the edge weights and how they are calculated and stored in each module (Section 4.1).** Second, a minimum spanning tree (MST) is built. A fully distributed and asynchronous algorithm [21] is used for this purpose. Third, the MST is partitioned. Initially, all modules form the initial cluster; then the MST is sequentially partitioned by finding, adjusting, and separating branches having the desired number of modules (Section 4.3).

### 4.1 Weight Calculation

In this section, an edge weight measure is defined that captures the geometric aspects of the ensemble. We start with the following definitions:

**Definition 4. Anchors:** Given a geometrical shape  $I$ , the minimum bounding box  $B$  is the box surrounding  $I$  aligned with the coordinate axes with the minimum volume. The set of anchors  $A$  is defined as the set of coordinates of the corners of the minimum bounding box.

Since the modules in a modular robot are placed in a regular lattice,  $A$  can be easily and efficiently calculated by selecting the different minimum and maximum combinations while varying on the three axes  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , so a total of 8 points are defined at the corners of  $B$ , that is, all possible combinations of  $(\{min_x, max_x\}, \{min_y, max_y\}, \{min_z, max_z\})$ .

**Definition 5. Edge weight:** Given two neighboring modules  $u$  and  $v$ , the weight  $w(u, v)$  of the edge  $e(u, v)$  connecting  $u$  and  $v$  in the graph  $G$ , is defined as:

$$w(u, v) = \min(\text{dist}(u, A), \text{dist}(v, A))$$

s.t:

$$\text{dist}(u, A) = \min\{\text{dist}(u, a) \mid a \in A\},$$

where  $\text{dist}$  represents the Euclidean distance.

The weight measure defined in definition 5 captures the geometrical aspects of the ensemble **in a way that edges connecting modules near the borders of the configuration will have lower weights. This will later results in having clusters positioned near borders which facilitate modules movements for self-reconfiguration.**

Anchors positions are calculated by building a spanning tree rooted at a randomly chosen module. During the building process, the values of  $min_x, min_y, min_z, max_x, max_y$  and  $max_z$  are returned to the root then broadcasted to all modules via the built tree. Upon reception, modules can calculate and store the distance to their nearest anchor then, store their adjacent edges weights.

### 4.2 Tree Construction

After all modules have stored their adjacent edge weights, a Minimum Spanning Tree (MST) is built. It minimizes the  $\sum_{(u,v) \in V_{MST}} w(u, v)$ . **Any distributed algorithm to find a MST can be used. We use a fully distributed asynchronous algorithm called GHS proposed in [21]. GHS is known to have an optimal communication complexity of  $O(m + n \log(n))$  messages. Its time complexity is  $O(n \log(n))$  which is not optimal. Existing distributed algorithms solve the minimum spanning tree problem with better time complexity at the cost of increasing the communication load [9, 25, 36, 45], which is not suitable for modular robots, as sending messages consumes the limited energy resources of the modules.**

The GHS algorithm requires that each edge has a unique weight. In case the weights are not distinct, which is our case, one can simply append the identities of the edge's adjacent nodes starting by lower order first. Initially, each node forms a fragment. Nodes wake up to start the GHS algorithm execution asynchronously, so there are no restrictions on the wake-up process, thus, all nodes can wake up at the same time or only one node can wake up and the tree is formed which is suitable for our case.

The GHS algorithm operates in phases. During each phase, fragments are extended by merging with other fragments. Nodes in each fragment are connected with edges to form a rooted MST. Each node holds a pointer to the next node in the tree that leads to the fragment's root. Fragments are merged through their minimum outgoing edge. To find the minimum outgoing edge of a fragment, a message is broadcasted asking all the fragment's nodes about their minimum outgoing edge. Each node waits for the answers of all its children in the tree before sending it upwards on the tree to reach the fragment's root. Once the minimum outgoing edge is found, a message is sent over that edge to the fragment on the other side. The two fragments will then merge into a larger fragment. If the two fragments chose the same minimum outgoing edge they agree to merge and the edge chosen by the two fragments is called *core edge*.

During the last phase, two fragments will be merged via a *core edge* into one large fragment forming the MST. We refer the reader to [21] for a complete description of the algorithm. Once the MST is formed, we can proceed to its partitioning. One can choose one of the core nodes adjacent to the core edge as the root of the tree. However, to have clusters distributed closer to borders as much as possible, we choose the root to be the node with minimum distance to one of the anchors (Definition 4) at the extremities of the initial configuration. Ties are broken randomly. To do so, after the root is found, it broadcasts a message through the tree. The receiving nodes set the sender as a parent leading to the root and save the edges leading to their children in the MST. The resulting tree on a 2D regular lattice is shown in Figure 5.

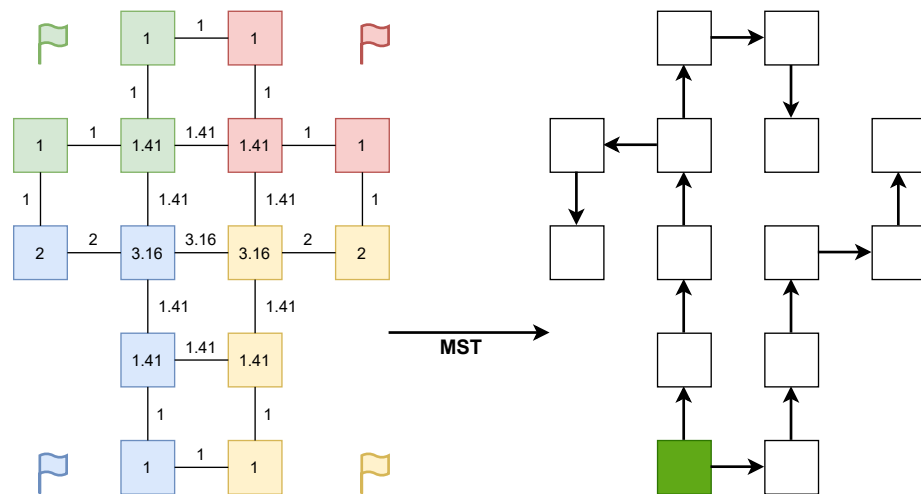


Fig. 5. An example of MST construction. On the left the weight distributed according to the distance to the nearest anchor (The flag of the same color). On the right, the MST is constructed and the root is colored in green.

### 4.3 Tree Partitioning

In this phase, given the set of desired cluster sizes  $S$ , the MST is partitioned in order to obtain  $k = |S|$  size-constrained clusters. The idea is to find the cut-edge that results in a branch to form the cluster in a way to minimize the difference between the number of modules in the branch and the desired number of modules in the cluster. To do so, we define the cut-edge as follows:

**Definition 6. cut-edge:** A cut-edge  $c_i$  is an edge  $e(u, v)$  that separates the partition containing  $u$  and  $v$  in which  $c_i$  is searched from the new partition. The nodes  $V_i$  of the new partition  $G_i$  are the nodes in the branch of the MST rooted at  $cutAt = v$ : the node in  $V_i$  adjacent to  $c_i$ . Given the set of desired partitions' sizes  $S$ , in order to satisfy the size constraint described in Section 2,  $|V_i|$  should be equal to  $s_i$ . However, a cut-edge that satisfies this constraint may not exist since a branch in the MST having exactly  $s_i$  nodes could not be found. Therefore, the cut-edge  $c_i$  is found in a way to minimize the difference  $Diff_{c_i}$  between the size of the sub-tree rooted at  $cutAt$  and  $s_i$ . Therefore:

$$c_i = e(u, v) \in E \mid Diff_{c_i} = \min_{e(u,v) \in E} |Diff_e|$$

s.t.

$$Diff_{e(u,v)} = s_i - subtreesize(v)$$

After removing a cut-edge  $c_i$ , the difference between the resulting cluster size and the desired size  $Diff_{c_i}$  may not be null if a branch containing the desired number of modules did not exist in the MST. To fix this issue two methods are presented in the following sections. The first in section 4.4 is a naive method that builds and exchanges a chain of modules to fix the erroneous cluster's size. The second in section 4.5, makes additional cuts and associates the resulting branches to the erroneous cluster until having the desired size.

### 4.4 Naive Solution Based On Modules Exchange

In this section, a way to satisfy the size-constraint for a cluster  $V_i$  resulted after the  $i^{th}$  cut is described. First, all modules belong to cluster  $V_0$ . The root of  $V_0$  initiates  $k - 1$  cuts to obtain  $k$  clusters. After each cut, if  $Diff_{c_i}$  is not null,  $Diff_{c_i}$  modules are exchanged between  $V_0$  and  $V_i$ . To do so, the furthest module in  $V_i$  from the root of  $V_i$  having at least one neighbor in  $V_0$  is chosen as chain source. Then, a chain consisting of a sequence of modules starting from the chain source is built. In case  $Diff_{c_i} > 0$ , the chain is built in  $V_i$  consisting of a maximum  $Diff_{c_i}$  module and exchanged with  $V_0$ . In case of  $Diff_{c_i} < 0$ , the chain is built in  $V_0$  starting from the chain source and exchanged with  $V_i$ . If after an exchange,  $Diff_{c_i}$  is still not null, the exchange process is repeated. An example of module exchange is shown in Figure 6 where four clusters of equal size are sequentially formed on a 2D humanoid shape starting from the left figure. The clusters roots are colored in brown, the chain source is colored in grey, and the exchanged chain is colored in white.

To build the chain, the last module added to the chain must choose the next one to add. A strategy is required to make this choice. Three strategies have been studied, they are presented in Figure 7 in an example where four equal sized clusters are formed on a 3D mug shape.

The first strategy in Figure 7a consists in adding the module with minimum distance to the centroid of the cluster. The second strategy in Figure 7b adds the module with the minimum Euclidean distance to the centroid. The third in Figure 7c builds a chain with modules on the border between  $V_i$  and  $V_0$ . As it can be seen the cluster shapes differ according to the exchange strategy.

**4.4.1 Exchanging Modules Problem.** A problem that can occur is that an exchanged chain can possibly disconnect a cluster. As shown in Figure 8, the cluster colored in red becomes disconnected : modules circled in red are not accessible

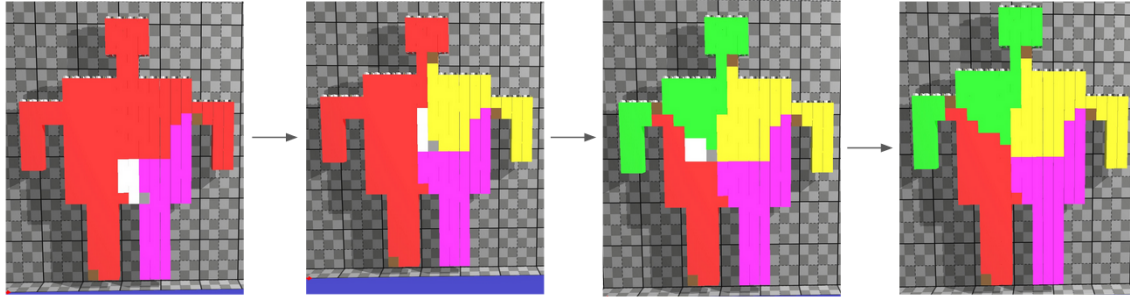
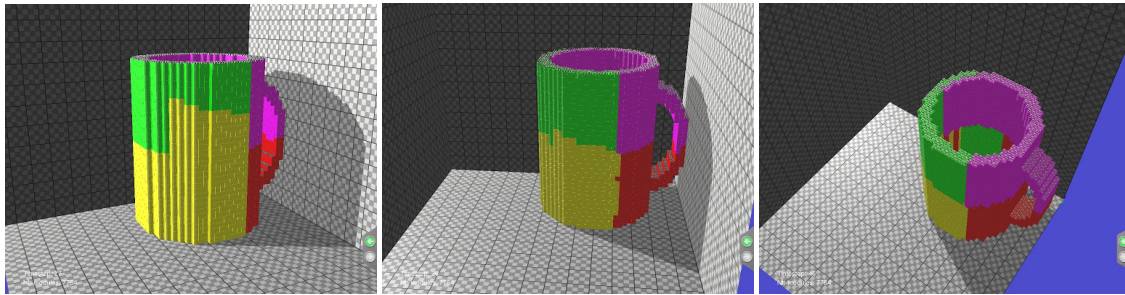


Fig. 6. Modules exchange example



(a) Distance to centroid

(b) Distance to center of gravity

(c) Exchange on borders

Fig. 7. Modules exchange strategies

by the root of their partition via a path of red modules only. This issue can be solved by checking, while building the exchange chain, if the module to be added causes a disconnection. Or after building the chain, if exchanging the built chain causes a disconnection, then find another chain. However, checking if exchanging a module or a chain causes a disconnection is a heavy time consuming process that requires an additional communication load. In addition, choosing the best strategy is not evident since it depends on the geometry of the ensemble. Therefore, another disconnection-less method to deal with the size difference resulted after a cut is described in the next section and it is considered in future sections.

#### 4.5 Additional Cuts

In this section, a new method to deal with size difference after a cut is presented. It consists in performing additional cuts until the size constraint for cluster  $i$  is satisfied i.e.  $Diff_{c_i} = 0$ . Initially, all modules belong to  $V_0$ . If after a cut  $c_i$ ,  $|V_i| \neq s_i$ , an additional cut is made to find an adjacent branch with size equal to  $Diff_{c_i}$  that contains at least one module that has a neighbor in  $V_i$  and the resulting branch is joined with or cut off the erroneous cluster. The flow chart for creating a partition  $V_i$  is depicted in Figure 9. Three cases are presented after an initial cut:

- (1) If  $Diff_{c_i} > 0$ , the root of  $V_i$  in the MST initiates the search for a new cut-edge  $c_{ij}(u, v)$  in its partition that minimizes:  $|Diff_{c_i} - subtree_{size}(v)|$ , the resulting branch is added to  $V_0$ .
- (2) If  $Diff_{c_i} < 0$ , the root of the MST initiates the search for a new cut-edge  $c_{ij}(u, v)$  in its partition  $V_0$  that minimizes:  $|Diff_{c_i} - subtree_{size}(v)|$ . The resulting branch is added to  $V_i$ .

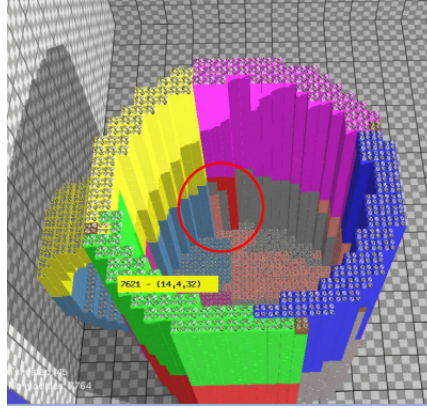
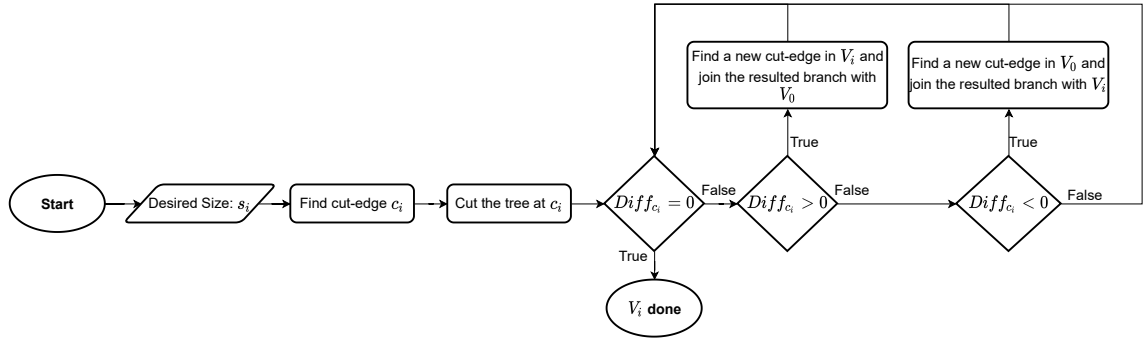


Fig. 8. Disconnection problem

(3) If  $Diff_{c_i} = 0$ , the size-constraint is satisfied. The root starts the search for a cut-edge  $c_{i+1}$  for the  $V_{i+1}$  partition.

Fig. 9. Flow chart for the  $i^{th}$  partition

This method guarantees that the resulted clusters are always connected since the structure of the MST is maintained. In addition, the size-constraint can always be satisfied because in a worst case scenario where both  $|Diff_{c_i}|$  and  $\forall v \in V, |Diff_{c_i} - subtreeSize(v)|$  are large,  $|Diff_{c_i}|$  additional cuts resulting in partitions containing 1 module each can be made.

Finding a cut-edge is initiated by calling the *cut* procedure (see Algorithms 1, 2, 3) with three parameters:

- (1) *recut*: A boolean that indicates if the cut-edge to be found is an additional cut to deal with a previous partition's size difference.
- (2) *desiredSize*: The desired size of the partition.
- (3) *adj*: In case of an erroneous size partition  $i$  ( $Diff_{c_i} \neq 0$ ), *adj* takes the value of the partition id  $i$  to which the resulted partition needs to be joined. Otherwise it takes the value 0.

Initially, all nodes belong to partition  $V_0$  with  $|V_0| = |V|$ . For  $i \in [1, k - 1]$ , a partition  $V_i$  is obtained after removing a cut-edge  $c_i$ . Algorithms 1, 2 and 3 describe partitioning. The root of the *MST* first executes the *cut* procedure that initiate

**Algorithm 1:** Partitioning algorithm (Part 1)

---

```

625 Algorithm 1: Partitioning algorithm (Part 1)
626 nbModules // Number of modules in the system
627 subTreeSize // sub-tree size of the module
628 cutAt // a boolean indicating if the module is the root of the cut branch
629 S // set containing the desired cluster sizes
630 MST // the minimum spanning tree built in phase 2
631 isMSTRoot // a boolean indicating if module is the root of the MST
632 recut // a boolean indicating if an additional cut is being found
633 toBestCut // the interface to reach the cut edge
634 Cluster // cluster identifier
635 minDiff // minimum Diff found
636 maxNbAdj // maximum number of modules adjacent to the erroneous cluster
637 toLastCut // root of the latest identified cluster
638 children // set containing child modules in the MST
639 nbWaitedAnswers
640
641 1 if isMSTRoot then
642   2 | isRoot  $\leftarrow$  true; i  $\leftarrow$  1; desiredSize  $\leftarrow$  S[i]
643   3 | cut(false, desiredSize, 0)
644
645 4 Procedure Cut(recut, desiredSize, adj):
646   5 | nbWaitedAnswers  $\leftarrow$  0
647   6 | foreach child in children do
648     7 | send FIND_CUT(recut, desiredSize, adj) to child
649     8 | nbWaitedAnswers  $\leftarrow$  nbWaitedAnswers + 1
650
651 9 Msg Handler FIND_CUT(recut, d, adj):
652 10 | minDiff  $\leftarrow$   $\infty$ ; subTreeSize  $\leftarrow$  0; desiredSize  $\leftarrow$  d
653 11 | if |children| = 0 then
654   12 | // Leaf
655   12 | subTreeSize  $\leftarrow$  1; nbAdj  $\leftarrow$  nb of neighbors in adj
656   13 | minDiff  $\leftarrow$  |subTreeSize - desiredSize|; maxNbAdj  $\leftarrow$  nbAdj
657   14 | send RESP_CUT(subTreeSize, minDiff, maxNbAdj) to parent
658 15 | else
659   16 | nbWaitedAnswers  $\leftarrow$  0
660   17 | foreach child in children do
661     18 | send FIND_CUT(recut, desiredSize, adj) to child
662     19 | nbWaitedAnswers  $\leftarrow$  nbWaitedAnswers + 1
663
664
665
666

```

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the search for the **first** cut-edge. **FIND\_CUT** message is sent in broadcast and **RESP\_CUT** is sent using convergecast as described in algorithm 1. During this process, each module calculates the difference between its sub-tree size and the desired cluster size. In case of an additional cut (*recut* = *true*), the branch to join with partition  $V_i$  should have at least one neighbor in  $V_i$  to avoid having disconnected partitions (algorithm 2, lines 32, 35). The minimum difference of a branch size with the maximum number of neighbors possible in *adj* is returned to the root, and the module interface to reach the *cutAt* module is saved in *toBestCut*. The root will then send a **CUT** message to the *cutAt* module connected to the cut-edge which will become the root of the new partition.

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677 Algorithm 2: Partitioning algorithm (Part 2)
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```

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```

20 Msg Handler RESP_CUT(s, e, m):
21 nbWaitedAnswers  $\leftarrow$  nbWaitedAnswers - 1; subTreeSize  $\leftarrow$  subTreeSize + s
22 if  $|e| < \text{minDiff}$  then
23   minDiff  $\leftarrow$  e; toBestCut  $\leftarrow$  sender
24 if recut = true and  $|e| = \text{minDiff}$  and m > maxNbAdj then
25   maxNbAdj  $\leftarrow$  m; toBestCut  $\leftarrow$  sender
26 if nbWaitedAnswers = 0 then
27   subTreeSize  $\leftarrow$  subTreeSize + 1
28   myDiff  $\leftarrow$  subTreeSize - desiredSize
29   if cutAt = false and isRoot = false then
30     if  $|\text{myDiff}| < \text{minDiff}$  then
31       minDiff  $\leftarrow$  myDiff; toBestCut  $\leftarrow$  NULL
32     if recut = true then
33       // Count nb of modules adjacent to cluster adj in current branch
34       maxNbAdj  $\leftarrow$  m + nbAdj
35       if maxNbAdj = 0 then
36         // Do not consider the branch
37         minDiff  $\leftarrow$   $\infty$ 
38       send RESP_CUT(subTreeSize, minDiff, maxNbAdj) to parent
39     else
40       if isRoot = true and (recut = false or desiredSize > 0) then
41         // Cluster i is found
42         send CUT(i) to toBestCut
43       else
44         // cutAt performs an additional cut and join the resulted branch to cluster 0
45         send CUT(0) to toBestCut
46
47 Msg Handler CUT(i):
48 if recut = false then
49   toLastcutAt  $\leftarrow$  toBestCut
50 if toBestCut = NULL then
51   cutAt  $\leftarrow$  true
52   Cluster  $\leftarrow$  i
53   myDiff  $\leftarrow$  subTreeSize - desiredSize
54   assign sub-tree to cluster i
55   if myDiff > 0 then
56     // Cluster i has an excess of modules. Must find a new cut to join the resulting branch
57     // to cluster 0
58     execute cut(true, myDiff, 0)
59   else
60     // Cluster i has a deficit of modules. Report the difference to the root
61     send REPORT_CUT(-myDiff)
62     to parent
63   else
64     send CUT(i) to toBestCut

```

---

Manuscript submitted to ACM

**Algorithm 3:** Partitioning algorithm (Part 3)

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```

729 Algorithm 3: Partitioning algorithm (Part 3)
730
731 57 Msg Handler REPORT_CUT(diff):
732
733 58 if isRoot then
734   59 if recut = false then
735     60 toLastcutAt  $\leftarrow$  sender
736   61 if diff > 0 then
737     // Find a new branch with size diff to join it with cluster i
738     recut  $\leftarrow$  true
739     execute cut(true, diff, i)
740   64 else
741     65 if diff < 0 then
742       // Send report to the last cutAt so it can find a new branch with size diff and join
743       it to cluster 0
744       send REPORT_CUT(|diff|) to toLastcutAt
745     67 else
746       // diff = 0
747       updateTree()
748       // Initiate the search for the next cluster
749       i  $\leftarrow$  i + 1
750       execute cut(false, si, 0)
751   71 else
752     72 if cutAt = true then
753       73 if diff > 0 then
754         desiredSize  $\leftarrow$  diff
755         75 if recut = true then
756           76 updateTree()
757           recut  $\leftarrow$  true
758           // Excess of modules. Must find a new cut of size diff and join the resulting branch
759           to cluster 0
760           execute cut(true, desiredSize, 0)
761         79 else
762           80 send REPORT_CUT(|diff|) to parent
763       81 else
764         82 if sender = parent then
765           83 send REPORT_CUT(diff) to toLastcutAt
766         84 else
767           85 send REPORT_CUT(diff) to parent

```

---

After a cut  $c_i$ , the *cutAt* module is aware of the size difference  $Diff_{c_i}$  of its partition. If  $Diff_{c_i} > 0$  (the resulted cluster has modules in excess), it calls  $cut(true, Diff, 0)$  to find a new *cut-edge* inside its partition and the resulted branch is rejoined with the initial partition  $V_0$  to minimize the difference (algorithm 2, line 45,51). Otherwise, it sends a **REPORT\_CUT** message with the value of  $Diff_{c_i}$  to the root of partition  $V_0$  (algorithm 2, line 53). When the root receives the message, if the received value of  $Diff_{c_i}$  is not null, it executes  $cut(true, Diff_{c_i}, i)$  to find a cut within its partition and join the resulted branch to the partition  $V_i$  (algorithm 3, line 61,63). If after joining a branch to  $V_i$  the size of  $V_i$  becomes larger than the desired size  $s_i$ , the root re-sends **REPORT\_CUT** message containing  $Diff_{c_i}$  to the last



781 *cutAt* module, which is the root of  $V_i$  to deal with this difference (algorithm 3, lines 66, 67). Otherwise, if the root receives  
 782 **REPORT\_CUT** message with the value of  $Diffc_i = 0$ , it updates its cluster tree and then executes  $cut(false, s_{i+1}, 0)$  to  
 783 find the partition  $V_{i+1}$  (algorithm 3, lines 67, 70). The tree must be updated to join the resulted branches after additional  
 784 cuts with their corresponding partitions. The  $updateTree()$  procedure depends on the algorithm used to build the  
 785 MST. After considering nodes in additional branches as disconnected nodes, we use the tree maintenance algorithm  
 786 described in [14] where the GHS algorithm for building the MST is relaunched inside the partition to join an additional  
 787 disconnected branch.  
 788  
 789

## 791 5 COMPLEXITY ANALYSIS

792 In this section, we give a complexity analysis by phase in terms of communication load and execution time. We note  
 793  $n = |V|$  the number of modules and  $m = |E|$  the number of connections between modules.  
 794  
 795

### 796 5.1 Communication Load

797 In the first phase, the anchor positions are found, and all edges' weights are calculated. It requires  $O(n)$  messages to find  
 798 and store anchors through tree traversal. In addition, to calculate and store an edge weight, two messages are exchanged  
 799 between the edge's adjacent modules. Therefore, the communication complexity of the first phase is  $O(n + m)$ .  
 800  
 801

802 The second phase consists in building a minimum spanning tree. We use the GHS algorithm described in [21] which  
 803 has a complexity of  $O(m + n \log n)$  in addition to  $O(n)$  for finding the root and redirecting edges towards it.  
 804

805 During the third phase, the tree is partitioned to obtain  $k$  partitions. The SC-Clust requires  $k - 1$  cuts plus a number  
 806  $a$  of additional cuts used to fix size differences. Therefore, the number of messages required is  $O((k - 1 + a) \log n)$  **since**  
 807 **after each cut the search space for the next cut is reduced**. The number of additional cuts  $a$  will be discussed in the  
 808 next section. Moreover, clusters' trees are updated after each cut to join additional branches resulted by additional cuts  
 809 which requires  $O(k \log n)$  messages.  
 810

811 Overall, by summing the complexities of the three phases, the communication complexity is equal to:  $O(n + m) +$   
 812  $O(n + m + m \log n) + O((k + a) \log n) = O(n + m) + O((m + k + a) \log n)$ . In a filled cubic geometry the maximum number  
 813 of connections  $m$  is equal to  $3n$ . Also, in all practical cases  $k \ll n$  and  $a \ll n$  unless  $s_i = 1$  for  $i \in [1, n]$ . Therefore, the  
 814 overall communication complexity can be expressed with the number of modules in the system  $n$  and it is equal to  
 815  $O(n) + O(n \log n) = O(n \log n)$ .  
 816  
 817

### 818 5.2 Execution Time

819 The time required for the first phase in which anchor positions are found and edges weights are calculated depends on  
 820 the diameter  $d$  of the network since the maximum tree length is bounded by  $d$ . Three tree traversals are required. Thus,  
 821 the time complexity of the first phase is  $O(d)$ .  
 822

823 The time complexity of building the tree in the second phase is  $O(n \log n)$  [21]. Redirecting all edges towards the  
 824 root requires a tree traversal. The time taken for tree traversal is  $O(n)$  since the maximum possible diameter of the  
 825 MST can be equal to  $n$ . Therefore, the time required for the second phase is  $O(n) + O(n \log n) = O(n \log n)$ .  
 826

827 As for the third phase, the time required for finding a cut is  $O(n)$ .  $k + a$  cuts need to be found. Therefore, the  
 828 time complexity for partitioning the MST is  $O((k + a) \cdot n)$  in addition to the time required for joining additional  
 829 cuts and updating clusters' tree which is  $O(k \cdot \log n)$ . Therefore, the overall time complexity of the third phase is  
 830  $O(n) + O(k \cdot \log n) = O(n)$ .  
 831

The overall complexity of the three phases is  $O(d) + O(n \log n) + O(n) = O(n \log n)$ . This complexity is mostly due to the construction of the MST.

## 6 SIMULATIONS AND RESULTS

We evaluated our algorithm in simulation using *VisibleSim* [59], a discrete-event 3D simulator for modular robots that supports thousands of modules that form large-scale ensembles. It supports different modular robotic systems including *3D Catoms* [48] used in our simulations.

We also validated the SC-Clust algorithm on real robotic systems called *Blinky Blocks*. The video<sup>1</sup> shows 6 different experiments on 144 real *Blinky Blocks* consisting of subdividing 3 different shapes (a square, a cube and a double F shape) into 4 clusters. For each shape, we run the code one time to create clusters with the same number of *Blinky Blocks* and another time to create heterogeneous clusters with 10 %, 20 %, 30 % and 40 % of the set.

*3D Catoms* are quasi-spherical modules placed in a FCC lattice where a module can connect to up to 12 neighbors. *VisibleSim* allows to light up a module with a certain color to show its status. We use this feature to distinguish clusters by coloring each cluster with a different color.

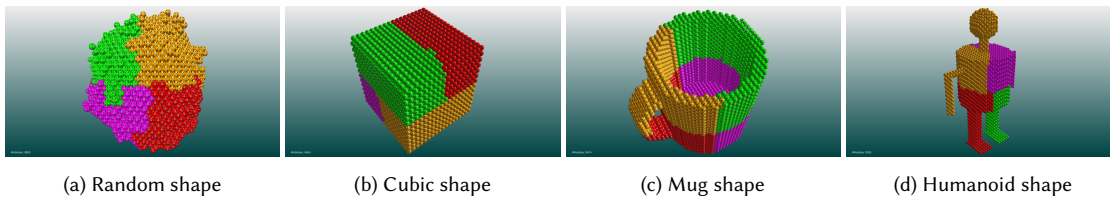


Fig. 10. DCut results on 4 different shapes with 4 clusters

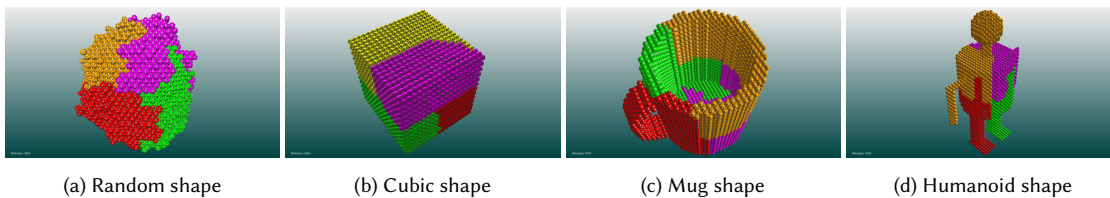


Fig. 11. SC-Clust results on 4 different shapes with 4 equal size clusters

Figure 10 shows 4 clusters created by DCut, our previously proposed partitioning algorithm that results in arbitrary sized clusters on 4 different shapes: a randomly generated shape forming an irregular dense cloud with 8,500 modules, a cubic shape formed by 7,225 modules with a densely filled volume, a mug shape formed by 8,584 modules and a humanoid shape formed by 8,291 modules with components of different densities. **The 4 clusters are distributed regularly along the borders of the configuration.** Figure 11 shows 4 clusters created by SC-Clust of equal sizes on the same shapes as in Figure 10. The created clusters shapes differ from the shapes created by the DCut algorithm since they partition the tree differently. The clusters created by SC-Clust show some irregularities on their borders due to additional cuts that attach or remove modules on the borders to satisfy the size constraint as explained in Section 4.5.

<sup>1</sup>YouTube video: <https://youtu.be/niYHGoqWbQs>

## 6.1 Evaluating SC-Clust

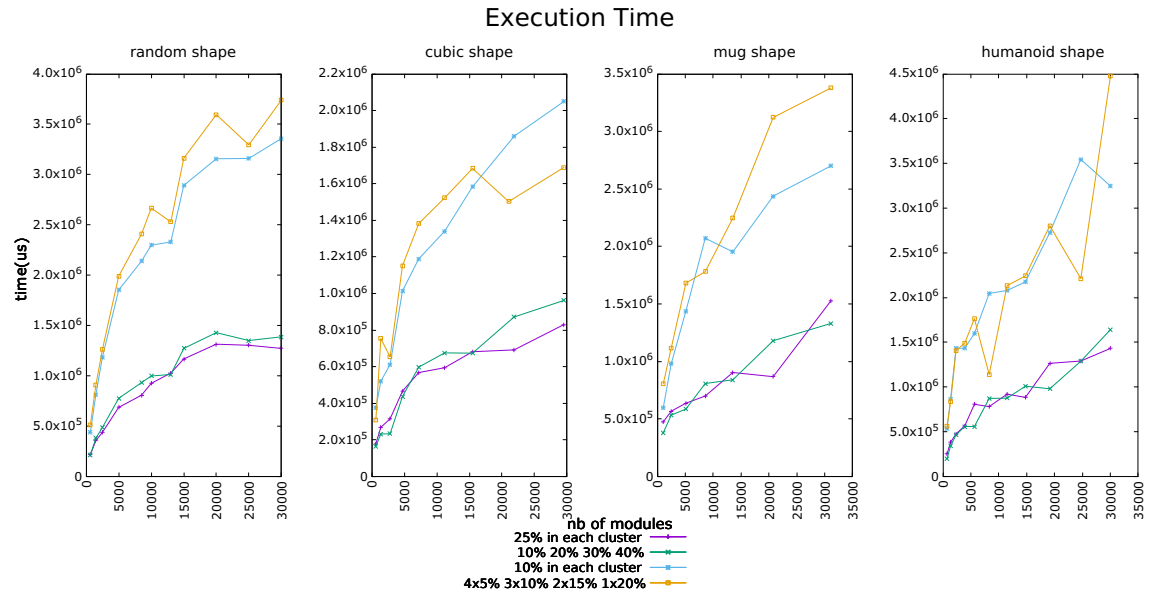


Fig. 12. SC-Clust execution time evaluation

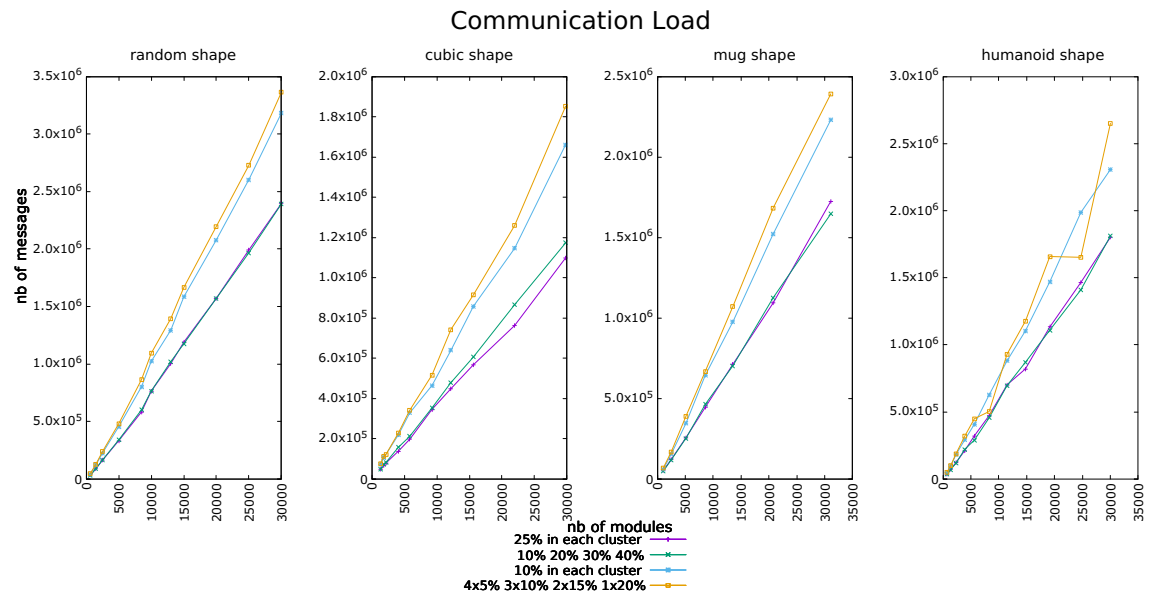


Fig. 13. SC-Clust communication load evaluation

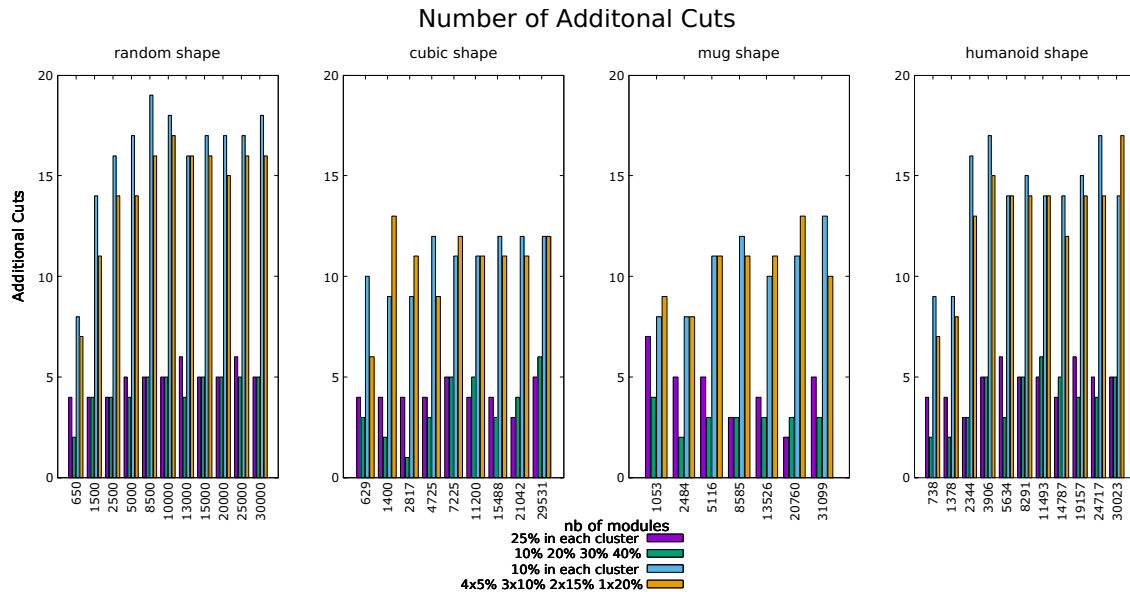


Fig. 14. Number of additional cuts

To provide an objective evaluation, we carried out different simulations with different shapes consisting of up to 30,000 *3D Catoms*. Each shape has different geometrical properties to show that the proposed algorithm find a solution independently from the geometrical shape. For each shape, we conducted simulations with the following cluster distributions:

- 4 clusters with 25 % in each cluster.
- 4 clusters with 10 % 20 % 30 % 40 %.
- 10 clusters with 10 % in each cluster.
- 10 clusters with 4 clusters containing 5 % each, 3 clusters containing 10 % each, 2 clusters containing 15 % each and 1 cluster containing 20 %.

**6.1.1 Execution Time.** Figure 12 shows the execution time of the SC-Clust algorithm. We can see that the execution time increases logarithmically when the number of modules increases. This is valid for all shapes and all cluster distributions. The reason is obvious. The increase in the number of clusters directly affects the execution time as explained in section 5.2 because as the number of clusters becomes greater, the number of cuts to be found increases. Moreover, the execution time is also affected by the shape and diameter of the system. When the diameter of the ensemble increases and its density decreases, the execution time increases; as can be seen in Figure 12, the humanoid shape requires more time than the other shapes. In addition, when the number of clusters is the same and the clusters sizes distribution differ, the execution time is affected due to the additional number of cuts (see in Figure 14) used to satisfy the size-constraint and the search space to find these cuts which vary according to the clusters sizes.

**6.1.2 Communication Load.** The communication load is shown in Figure 13. The number of exchanged messages for all shapes increases linearly when the number of modules in the system increases. It also increases when the number of clusters becomes larger due to the messages needed to find the cuts. The communication load complexity in Section

5.1 depends on the number of modules and the connections between modules. The random shape presents the largest number of connections between its modules; thus, it requires a larger number of exchanged messages. Moreover, when sizes distributions with the same number of clusters differ, it slightly affects the number of exchanged messages, which are needed to find additional cuts and join branches to satisfy the size constraint.

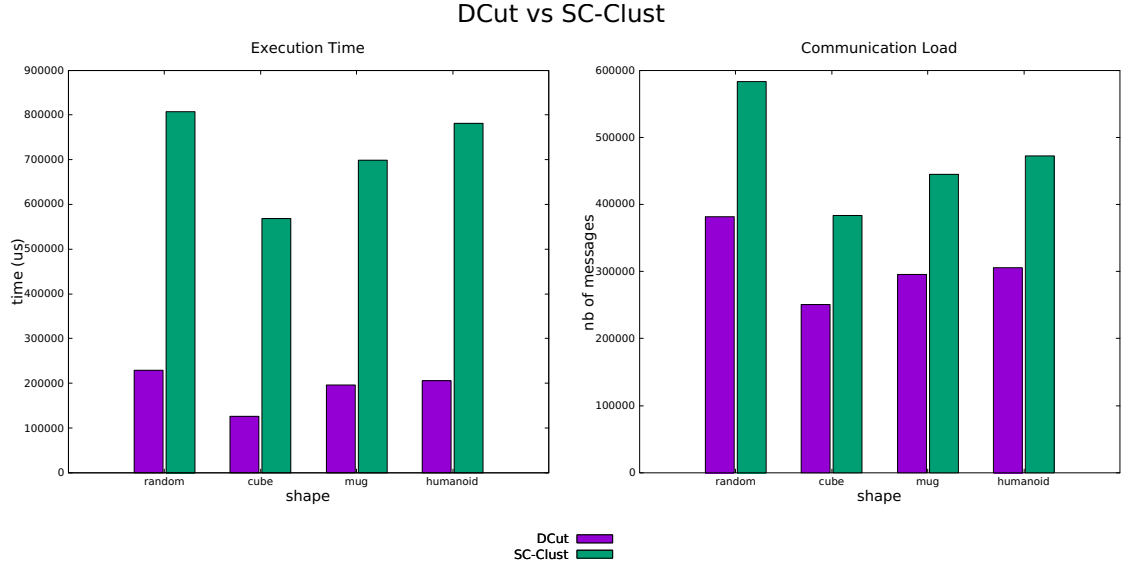


Fig. 15. Comparing DCut and SC-Clust

6.1.3 *Additional Cuts.* We recall that additional cuts are needed when the resulted cluster size after an initial cut does not satisfy the size constraint. So, additional cuts are performed until the cluster size is equal to the desired size. Figure 14 shows the number of additional cuts that have a direct impact on execution time and communication load. It can be seen that when the number of clusters becomes larger, the number of additional cuts needed increases. Furthermore, it is not affected by the number of modules in the system. It is directly affected by the formation of the MST, which in its turn affects by the geometrical aspects of the ensemble and not its size. Therefore, it can be arbitrary for the same number of clusters with different size distributions since finding a cut that results in a cluster with a size equal to the desired size depends on finding a cut module with a sub-tree size equal to the desired size, which highly depends on the structure of the MST.

## 6.2 Comparing DCut with SC-Clust

Here, we compare the DCut algorithm with SC-Clust. Figure 15 compares DCut with SC-Clust in terms of execution time and communication load on the shapes of Figures 10 and 11 with the same number of modules for each shape and 4 clusters. As seen in Figure 15, the SC-Clust requires more exchanged messages on all shapes since for each cut, additional cuts may be needed to satisfy the size constraint. As for the execution time, the amount needed by SC-Clust is significantly higher. The reason is that the DCut algorithm finds cuts in parallel in case of  $k > 3$ . On the other hand, finding cuts in SC-Clust is completely sequential: finding a cluster  $V_i$  cannot begin before the cluster  $V_{i-1}$  has been

found. In addition, SC-Clust requires  $k - 1 + a$  cuts to obtain  $k$  clusters where  $a$  is the number of additional cuts. DCut requires  $k - 1$  cuts.

## 7 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

In this work, we proposed SC-Clust, a fully distributed size-constrained clustering algorithm based on graph cuts. It assembles modules with neighbor-to-neighbor communication in a large scale modular robot into clusters of given sizes to enhance the self-reconfiguration of modular robot-based programmable matter **using cluster-based methods to increase the parallelization of movements**. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first distributed tree-based clustering algorithm with a size-constraint in the literature. We evaluated our algorithm on multiple shapes with different geometrical properties while varying the number of modules, the number of clusters, and the cluster sizes. The results show that our algorithm is scalable and efficient with  $O(n \log n)$  time and communication complexity.

In the future, we aim to implement our algorithm on real large scale modular robotics ensembles. Then we intend to study the clusters' leaders positions to optimize inter and intra-cluster communication. In addition, we aim to control the shape and position of each cluster in the initial shape to reduce the number of modules in blocking positions in order to facilitate the transition to the goal shape. Furthermore, we seek to show the improvement that clustering can yield to the self-reconfiguration process and work on proposing cluster-based self-reconfiguration algorithms.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work has been supported by the EIPHI Graduate School (contract "ANR-17-EURE-0002")

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