Homogeneous Coordinates

Adding a 4th Value to an XYZ Triple

We usually think of a 3D point as being represented by a triple: (x,y,z).
Using homogeneous coordinates, we add a 4th number: (x,y,z,w).
A graphics system, by convention, performs transformations and clipping using (x,y,z,w) and then divides x, y, and z by w before it uses them.

\[
X = \frac{x}{w}, \quad Y = \frac{y}{w}, \quad Z = \frac{z}{w}
\]

Thus (1,2,3,1), (2,4,6,2), (-1,-2,-3,-1) all represent the same 3D point.

This Seems Awkward – Why Do It?

One reason is that it allows for perspective division within the matrix mechanism. The OpenGL call `glFrustum(left, right, bottom, top, near, far)` creates this matrix:

\[
\begin{bmatrix}
\frac{2}{\text{near} - \text{far}} & 0 & 0 & \text{near} - \text{far} \\
0 & \frac{1}{\text{top} - \text{bottom}} & 0 & \text{top} - \text{bottom} \\
0 & 0 & \frac{2}{\text{far} - \text{near}} & -\text{far} - \text{near} \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 1
\end{bmatrix}
\]

This gives \( w' = -z \), which is the necessary divisor for perspective.

Another Reason is to be able to Represent Points at Infinity

This is useful to be able specify a parallel light source by placing the light source location at infinity.
The point (1,2,3,1) represents the 3D point (1,2,3)
The point (1,2,3,.5) represents the 3D point (2,4,6)
The point (1,2,3,.01) represents the point (100,200,300)
So, (1,2,3,0) represents a point at infinity, but along the ray from the origin through (1,2,3)
Points-at-infinity are used for parallel light sources and some shadow algorithms.

However, When Using Homogeneous Coordinates, You Sometimes

Just Need to be able to get a Vector Between Two Points

To get a vector between two homogeneous points, we subtract them:

\[
(x_1, y_1, z_1, w_1) - (x_2, y_2, z_2, w_2) = \frac{(x_1 - x_2, y_1 - y_2, z_1 - z_2)}{w_2}
\]

Fortunately, most of the time that we do this, we only want a unit vector in that direction, not the full vector. So, we can ignore the denominator, and just say:

\[
\hat{v} = \text{normalize}(w_2x_1 - w_1x_2, w_2y_1 - w_1y_2, w_2z_1 - w_1z_2)
\]

However, to save space in the sample code, these notes will assume that \( w = 1 \).