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Department of Computer Science
Technical Report

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ISSN 0935–3232 · Aachener Informatik Berichte · AIB-2006-06

RWTH Aachen · Department of Computer Science · May 2006

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Abstract. We introduce *divide-and-color*, a new technique for the solution of hard graph problems. It is a combination of the well-known *divide-and-conquer* paradigm and *color-coding* [2]. Our approach first randomly colors all edges or nodes of a graph black and white, and then solves the problem recursively on the two induced parts.
We demonstrate this technique by giving new randomized algorithms for the solution of two important problems. These yield runtime bounds of $O^*(4^k)$ for finding a simple path of length k and $O^*(4^{(h-1)k})$ for finding k edge-disjoint (resp. vertex-disjoint) copies of a graph H with h edges (resp. h nodes) in a given graph. Derandomization gives deterministic algorithms for these problems with running times $O^*(2^{4k})$ and $O^*(2^{4hk})$, respectively.
All these results significantly improve over the currently known best bounds. In particular, our generic algorithms beat specialized ones that have been designed to find k triangles or paths of length two.

1 Introduction

As of today, it is commonly assumed that there are no polynomial-time algorithms for NP-complete problems. On the other hand, these problems occur over and over again in real-life applications, and thus simply need to be dealt with. This contradictory situation has led to the development of several relaxed notions of "solving," such as approximation and randomization. Another approach is called parameterized complexity.

In classical NP-completeness theory, run-time bounds are derived with regard to the worst case taken over all instances of the same size. Informally, the paradigm of parameterized complexity [5] tries to look closer in order to find properties that better measure the hardness of a problem. An instance of length n may still be easy to solve if it fulfills a certain property. If this property can be quantified by a number k—such as the treewidth of a graph, the number of literals that may be set to true in a propositional formula, or the maximum length of a simple path—this number can then be seen as a parameter describing the hardness of an instance.

More precisely, if there exists an algorithm that solves the problem in $O(f(k) \cdot poly(n))$ time for some function f, we say that the problem is fixed-parameter tractable. The corresponding complexity class is called FPT. Since appropriately chosen parameters can be very small in instances occuring in practice, this paradigm often yields rather applicable algorithms. On the other hand, the values of $f(k)$ can be rather large for certain problems. For example, the best parameterized algorithm for Dominating Set Of Queens known today has a running time of $O^*(225^k)$ [3].

There are many techniques for designing FPT-algorithms in the literature, among them kernelization, bounded search trees, dynamic programming, treewidth methods and color-coding. The best runtime bounds for the parameterized versions of some graph problems have been obtained using the latter method, which has been introduced by Alon *et al.* [2]. The underlying idea of this technique is to color the nodes or edges of a graph randomly in order to ease the detection of certain subgraphs. For instance, a path of length k may be hard to find[1], but after coloring the nodes with k colors, a *colorful* path of length $k-1$—i.e., a path that consists of k nodes having k different colors—can be detected quite quickly using dynamic programming.

The runtime bounds obtained via color-coding are usually of the form $O^*(c^k)$ for some constant c. Note that this is only exponential in k and thus much better than, e.g., bounds resulting from Courcelle's famous theorem [4]. The constant c, however, can be very large, as detailed in Section 2. Derandomizing the resulting algorithms [2, 6] leads to bounds of the same form with even larger constants.

In this paper, we present a new and more efficient color-coding technique that can also be derandomized with less dramatic effects on the runtime bound. The crucial idea lies in using only two colors combined with a divide-and-conquer approach. Recursively solving the problem on two subgraphs induced by the coloring turns out to be easier than employing a dynamic programming algorithm as used in classical color-coding.

For a graph G, let $V[G]$ denote the set nodes in G. Similarly, let $E[G]$ denote the set of edges. We apply the new technique to several graph problems, obtaining new runtime bounds of $O^*(2^{2k})$ for Longest Path and $O^*(2^{2(h-1)k})$ for H-Graph Packing, where $h = |V[H]|$, as well as H-Graph Edge-Packing where $h = |E[H]|$, in the randomized case. The respective bounds for the derandomized case are $O^*(2^{4k})$ and $O^*(2^{4hk})$. Let us first formally define the problems that are to play a rôle in what follows.

Definition 1. *The problem* Longest Path *is defined as follows:*

Input: *A graph G and a number k*
Parameter: k
Question: *Is there a simple path of length k in G?*

The classical color-coding algorithm by Alon *et al.* [2] solves Longest Path in time $O^*((2e)^k) = O^*(2^{2.45k})$ (randomized) or $2^{O(k)}$ with large hidden constants (deterministic). We improve these running times to $O^*(2^{2k})$ and $O^*(2^{4k})$, respectively.

Definition 2. *The problem H-*Graph Packing *is defined as follows:*

Input: *A graph G and a number k*
Parameter: k
Question: *Are there k vertex-disjoint instances of H in G?*

Definition 3. *The problem H-*Graph Edge-Packing *is defined as follows:*

Input: *A graph G and a number k*

[1] One way of solving this problem is to look at a depth-first search tree of the graph. If there is a back-edge spanning a path of length k, we are done. Otherwise, there is a tree decomposition of width k, and the problem can be solved using Courcelle's Theorem [4]. Unfortunately, this method yields extremely large values of $f(k)$ even for small k.

Parameter: k
Question: Are there k edge-disjoint instances of H in G?

Until now, the best runtime bounds known for H-GRAPH PACKING and H-GRAPH EDGE-PACKING are $O^*(2^{2.45hk})$ (randomized) and $O^*(2^{10hk})$ (deterministic) [6]. We take these to $O^*(2^{2(h-1)k})$ and $O^*(2^{4hk})$, respectively.

Specialized algorithms have been designed for at least two variants of H-GRAPH PACKING and H-GRAPH EDGE-PACKING, the first being $K_{2,1}$-PACKING [9] and the second EDGE-DISJOINT TRIANGLE PACKING [8]. The corresponding runtime bounds are $O^*(2^{5.301k})$ and $O^*(2^{\frac{9}{2}k\log k+\frac{9}{2}k})$.[2] Our randomized algorithms improve both of these to $O^*(2^{4k})$. Moreover, the derandomized version yields a bound of $O^*(2^{12k})$ for EDGE-DISJOINT TRIANGLE PACKING.

2 Color-Coding

Unfortunately, the papers on color-coding that have been published so far omit a lot of details, especially regarding hidden factors in the respective runtime bounds. This holds for the results on both the problem of finding a path of length k and the problem of finding k occurrences of a fixed subgraph. In the seminal paper on color-coding [2], for example, Alon *et al.* considered k a mere constant. In subsequent papers [6, 8], k was already interpreted as a parameter, but the runtime bounds were stated without giving explicit constants for the basis of the exponential function. This section is dedicated to a more precise analysis of these bounds.

Let us first investigate the algorithm for H-GRAPH EDGE-PACKING by Fellows *et al.* [6]: Given a graph G and a number k, does G contain k edge-disjoint occurrences of some fixed subgraph H? Let h denote the number of edges in H. For the analysis, fix a set M of k edge-disjoint occurrences of H in an instance. If coloring all the edges in G randomly using hk colors leaves all the edges in M colored differently, the following algorithm will find these k occurrences of H (or, possibly, some other k occurrences):

For each $S \subseteq \{1, \ldots, hk\}$ where $|S|$ is a multiple of h, use dynamic programming to find out whether G contains $|S|/h$ occurrences of H whose edges have exactly the colors in S. If this is eventually the case for $S = \{1, \ldots, hk\}$, the graph G indeed contains k edge-disjoint occurrences of H. This computation takes $O^*(2^{hk})$ steps.

The probability of coloring all the hk edges in M with different colors is $(hk)!/(hk)^{hk} = \Omega(\sqrt{k}e^{-hk})$. In order to make the failure probability exponentially small, it thus suffices to repeat the entire procedure $O^*(e^{hk})$ times. This gives a total running time of $O^*((2e)^{hk}) = O^*(5.44^{hk})$.

A deterministic algorithm can be obtained via derandomization, as described by Alon *et al.* [2]. It is possible to construct a family $\mathcal{F}$ of hash functions $\{1, \ldots, n\} \to \{1, \ldots, k\}$ such that for every $S \subseteq \{1, \ldots, n\}$ with $|S| = k$ there is one $f \in \mathcal{F}$ that maps S onto $\{1, \ldots, k\}$, i.e., is bijective on S. There are such families of size $2^{O(k)} \log n$ that can be efficiently constructed and evaluated [2].

[2] The latter algorithm is based on kernelization. There also is a $2^{O(k)}$-algorithm based on color-coding. However, the constants hidden in the O-notation are so large that the kernelization-based algorithm is considered more practical.

Instead of coloring the edges randomly, we can consecutively use all members of a family of hash functions $f: E \to \{1, \ldots, hk\}$. This leads to a running time of $2^{O(hk)}n^{O(h)}$.

The constants in the above bound are rather large, but Fellows *et al.* have proposed two ideas on how to improve the running time [6]. The first one is to use more colors in order to increase the probability that all the edges in a solution are assigned different colors. This, however, leads to a more costly dynamic programming phase. The second idea regards the family of hash functions employed: Alon *et al.* did not aim to minimize the size of $\mathcal{F}$ with respect to k. Instead, efficient evaluation was a criterion, but is not needed in this context. For example, a size of $O^*(2^{4hk})$ would be possible at the expense of using $6hk$ colors, leading to an overall running time of only $O^*(2^{10hk})$ [6, 7, 10].

Let us now briefly discuss the original algorithm [2] for LONGEST PATH: We color the nodes randomly using k colors. For a fixed path of length k, there are k^k possible colorings, $k!$ of which make the path *colorful* by assigning k different colors to the k nodes in the path. Hence, the path is colorful with a probability of e^{-k}. A colorful path of length k can be detected in $O^*(2^k)$ steps using dynamic programming. On the other hand, it takes e^k iterations to obtain an exponentially small probability that the path is never colorful. Consequently, this randomized algorithm for LONGEST PATH has a runtime bound of $O^*((2e)^k) = O^*(5.44^k)$.

3 Algorithms based on Divide-and-Color

The basic idea of our new approach is to use only two colors—say, black and white—and to solve a reduced instance of the problem on each of the two induced subgraphs recursively. These two solutions must then be combined into a solution for the original instance. Intuitively, this method has three major advantages:

Firstly, when coloring in stages, a wrong coloring may be amended in the current stage, whereas in classical color-coding, one would have to start from scratch. Secondly, in opposition to classical color-coding, there is no more need for solving the complicated problem addressed by the dynamic programming algorithm. This is because the recursive approach eventually reduces the problem to trivial instances. Thirdly, derandomization becomes a lot easier in the new approach, because we can use almost k-wise independent random variables [1] instead of universal families of hash functions.

3.1 Finding a Path of Length k

Instead of solving the decision problem LONGEST PATH directly, we use an embedding into the following closely related search problem:

Definition 4. *Given a graph $G = (V, E)$, we write $u \xrightarrow{k} v$ for two nodes $u, v \in V$ whenever there is a simple path of length $k - 1$ from u to v.*

The problem EXTENDED LONGEST PATH *is defined as follows:*

Input: *A graph $G = (V, E)$ and a number k*
Parameter: k
Output: *The set $\{\, (u, v) \in V^2 \mid u \xrightarrow{k} v \,\}$.*

We say an algorithm solves Extended Longest Path *with error probability* p *if for every graph* $G = (V, E)$ *and every* $u, v \in V$ *with* $u \xrightarrow{k} v$ *its result contains* (u, v) *with probability at least* p *on input* G, k.

Lemma 1. *Algorithm L from Table 1 solves* Extended Longest Path *with error probability at most* $1/4$ *in time* $O^*(4^k)$.

Input: A graph $G = (V, E)$ and a number k
Parameter: k
Output: The set $\{ (u, v) \in V^2 \mid u \xrightarrow{k} v \}$.

if $k = 1$ **then return** $\{ (v, v) \mid v \in V \}$ **fi**;
for $3 \cdot 2^k$ times **do**
  Choose some $V' \in 2^V$ with uniform probability;
  $G_1 := G[V']$; $G_2 := G[V - V']$; $R := \emptyset$;
  for all $u, v, w, x \in V$ **do**
    if $(u, v) \in L(G_1, \lceil k/2 \rceil) \wedge \{v, w\} \in E \wedge (w, x) \in L(G_2, \lfloor k/2 \rfloor)$
    then $R := R \cup \{(u, x)\}$ **fi**
  od
od;
return R

Table 1. Algorithm L

Proof. It is easy to see that if Algorithm L returns a pair $\{u, v\}$, then indeed $u \xrightarrow{k} v$. On the other hand, if G contains such a path, L does not return the corresponding pair $\{u, v\}$ with some probability p_k.

Assume there is a simple k-node path from u to v in G. The probability that the first $\lceil k/2 \rceil$ nodes are black and that the other $\lfloor k/2 \rfloor$ nodes are white is 2^{-k}. In that case, $L(G_1)$ and $L(G_2)$ do not contain pairs that allow the algorithm to insert $\{u, v\}$ into R with probability at most $2p_{\lceil k/2 \rceil}$. After $3 \cdot 2^k$ iterations, the probability that $\{u, v\} \notin R$ is at least

$$\Bigl(1 - 2^{-k} + 2^{-k+1} p_{\lfloor k/2 \rfloor}\Bigr)^{3 \cdot 2^k},$$

because with probability $1 - 2^{-k}$ the coloring is bad and with probability at most $2^{-k+1} p_{\lceil k/1 \rceil}$ the coloring is good, but the recursive detection of the black or white subpath fails. We show that $p_k \le 1/4$ for every k: Obviously $p_1 = 0$, and if $k \ge 2$ then we get $p_k \le (1 - 2^{-k} + 2^{-k+1}/4)^{3 \cdot 2^k} = (1 - 2^{-(k+1)})^{\frac{3}{2} \cdot 2^{k+1}} \le e^{-3/2} < 1/4$ by induction on k.

Let T_k denote the number of recursive calls issued by Algorithm L. We obtain the recurrence

$$T_k \le 3 \cdot 2^k \cdot (T_{\lceil k/2 \rceil} + T_{\lfloor k/2 \rfloor}) \le 3 \cdot 2^{k+1} T_{\lceil k/2 \rceil}.$$

Using the simple fact that $k + \lceil k/2 \rceil + \bigl\lceil \lceil k/2 \rceil / 2 \bigr\rceil + \cdots + 1 \le 2k + \log k$ where the sum ends when a term becomes 1, we get $T_k = O(3^{\log k} 4^k) = O(k^{\log 3} 4^k) = O^*(4^k)$.

Algorithms L thus finds a paths of length k with probability at least $3/4$ if one exists. Iterating it linearly often yields an exponentially small error probability while keeping the running time at $O^*(4^k)$. $\square$

Theorem 1. LONGEST PATH *can be solved with exponentially small error probability in time* $O^*(4^k)$.

Proof. Applying Algorithm L a linear number of times solves the more general problem EXTENDED LONGEST PATH with exponentially small error probability. □

3.2 Graph Packing and Graph Edge-Packing

Input: A graph $G = (V, E)$ and a number k
Parameter: k
Question: Does G contain k edge-disjoint copies of H?

if $k \leq 1$ **then**
  if there are k or more edge-disjoint copies of H **then return** *true*
  else return *false* **fi**
fi;
for $3 \cdot 2^{(h-1)k}$ times **do**
  Choose some $E' \in 2^E$ with uniform probability;
  $G_1 := (V, E')$; $G_2 := (V, E - E')$;
  if $P(G_1, \lceil k/2 \rceil) \wedge P(G_2, \lfloor k/2 \rfloor)$ **then return** *true* **fi**
od;
return *false*

Table 2. Algorithm P

Lemma 2. *Algorithm P from Table 2 solves* H-GRAPH EDGE-PACKING *with failure probability* $1/4$ *in time* $O^*(4^{(h-1)k})$*, where* $h = |E[H]|$.

Proof. Assume that H has $h > 1$ edges. In line 6 of the algorithm, E is partitioned into E' and $E - E'$. Let us call the edges in E' *black* and the edges in $E - E'$ *white*. Fix a solution, i.e., a set of k edge-disjoint copies of H in G. For each copy of H, the probability that all its edges have the same color is 2^{-h+1}. The probability that all copies are monochromatic is $2^{-(h-1)k}$ and the probability that exactly $\lceil k/2 \rceil$ copies are black and $\lfloor k/2 \rfloor$ copies are white is at least $2^{-(h-1)k}/k$.

Let p_k be the probability that Algorithm P does not find the fixed solution. Then

$$p_k \leq \left(1 - \frac{2^{-(h-1)k}}{k} + \frac{2^{-(h-1)k}}{k}\left(p_{\lceil k/2 \rceil} + p_{\lfloor k/2 \rfloor}\right)\right)^{3 \cdot 2^{-(h-1)k}}.$$

We show by induction on k that $p_k \leq 1/4$. For $k \leq 1$ we have $p_k = 0$ and if $k > 1$ then

$$p_k \leq \left(1 - \frac{2^{-(h-1)k}}{k} + \frac{2^{-(h-1)k}}{2k}\right)^{3 \cdot 2^{(h-1)k}} \leq \left(1 - 2^{-(h-1)k-1}\right)^{3 \cdot 2^{(h-1)k}} < e^{-3/2}.$$

The runtime analysis is very similar to that of Algorithm L. □

Theorem 2.

1. H-GRAPH EDGE-PACKING *can be solved with exponential small error probability in* $O^*(2^{2(h-1)k})$ *steps where* $h = |E[H]|$.

2. H-Graph Packing *can be solved with exponential small error probability in* $O^*(2^{2(h-1)k})$ *steps where* $h = |V[H]|$.

Proof. For H-Graph Edge-Packing simply repeat the 1/4-error-probability algorithm linearly often in order to amplify the success probability. H-Graph Packing can be solved very similarly. Essentially, we have to color nodes instead of edges. □

Corollary 1. *We can solve* Edge-Disjoint Triangle Packing *in* $O^*(2^{4k})$ *steps and* $K_{1,s}$-Packing *in* $O^*(2^{2sk})$ *with exponentially small failure probability.*

4 Derandomization

The common object of the divide-and-color algorithms introduced in the last section lies in finding some subset S of nodes or edges with some property and given size. The first step towards this goal always consists in coloring all nodes or edges black and white. Progress will be made whenever this global coloring implies one particular coloring of S. For example, when looking for a path of length k, we want the first half of this path black, and the second one white. In the randomized approaches detailed above, we color the nodes or edges randomly and repeat this very often, so that the right coloring of S is hit with high probability.

In order to make failure impossible, we have to deterministically cycle through a family of node or edge colorings. Doing so will succeed when we make sure that *every* possible coloring of S is hit at least once. Since we do not know S, however, we need to hit every coloring for any set of size $|S|$ at least once. The notion of (almost) k-wise independence will ease this task for us.

Definition 5. **[1]** *A set* $X \subseteq \{0,1\}^n$ *is* k-wise independent *if when* $x_1 \ldots x_n$ *is chosen uniformly from* X, *then for any* k *positions* $i_1 < \cdots < i_k$ *and any* k*-bit string* y, *we have* $\Pr[x_{i_1} \ldots x_{i_k} = y] = 2^{-k}$. *It is* (ϵ, k)-independent *if* $|\Pr[x_{i_1} \ldots x_{i_k} = y] - 2^{-k}| \leq \epsilon$.

If we had an $X \subseteq \{0,1\}^n$ that is $(2^{-|S|-1}, |S|)$-independent, we could color a set of n nodes or edges according to each element in X with the guarentee that S is colored in every possible way at least once. Fortunately, Alon *et al.* have found a construction that does the job.

Proposition 1. **[1]** *Let* $n = 2^t - 1$ *and let* k *be an odd integer. Then it is possible to construct* n *bits that are* (ϵ, k)*-independent using* $2\left(\lceil \log \frac{1}{\epsilon} + \log(1 + (k-1)t/2) \rceil\right)$ *bits.*

Moreover, their construction works in quasi-linear time. Notice that the number of bits in the seed of an $(2^{-|S|-1}, |S|)$-wise independent set X can be bounded by $2|S| + 2\log|S| + 2\log\log n + 2$. The cardinality of X is thus no more than $O(4^{|S|} \cdot |S|^2 \cdot \log^2 n)$ and X can be constructed in $O^*(4^{|S|})$ time.

Theorem 3. *Algorithm* P' *solves* H-Graph Edge-Packing *in time* $O^*(16^{hk})$, *where* $h = |E[H]|$.

Input: A graph $G = (V, E)$, $E = \{e_1, \ldots, e_m\}$ and a number k
Parameter: k
Question: Does G contain k edge-disjoint copies of H?

if $k \leq 1$ **then**
  if there are k or more edge-disjoint copies of H **then return** *true*
  else return *false* **fi**
fi;
for all $s \in \{0,1\}^{\lceil 2hk+2\log(hk)+2\log\log|E|\rceil+2}$ **do**
  Expand s into $x \in \{0,1\}^{|E|}$ as in Proposition 1;
  $E' := \{\, e_i \in E \mid x_i = 1 \,\}$;
  $G_1 := (V, E')$; $G_2 := (V, E - E')$;
  if $P(G_1, \lceil k/2 \rceil) \wedge P(G_2, \lfloor k/2 \rfloor)$ **then return** *true* **fi**
od;
return *false*

Table 3. Algorithm P′

Proof. There are $O(4^{hk}(hk)^2 \log^2|E|) = O^*(4^{hk})$ possibilities to choose s. Since the algorithm calls itself recursively, the total number of recursive calls is $O^*(16^{hk})$.

The correctness follows from the fact that for a solution consisting of k copies of H with a total of hk edges, E' eventually contains exactly the edges of $\lceil k/2 \rceil$ many of those copies. □

Analogously, we can prove the following theorem.

Theorem 4. *There is a deterministic algorithm that solves* Longest Path *in time $O^*(16^k)$.*

5 Conclusion

We have introduced a new technique and applied it to design faster algorithms for several problems. However, we did not exhaust the method's full potential. In particular, we think that the cost incurred by derandomization could be decreased. While almost k-wise independent random variables seem to be the right tool for derandomizing the Longest Path algorithm, a weaker property suffices for packing problems. In the case of Triangle Packing, for instance, we used almost $3k$-independent random variables to make sure we encounter every possible coloring of the $3k$ edges of k triangles. It would be enough, however, if for every possible way of grouping $3k$ edges into k triangles, exactly half of these triangles were colored black and the others white at least once. Designing appropriate sample spaces thus seems to be a promising goal.

Acknowledgement. We thank Martin Dietzfelbinger for pointing us in the direction of almost k-wise independent random variables.

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