

Quasi-Planar Graphs Have a Linear Number of Edges*

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Abstract

A graph is called *quasi-planar* if it can be drawn in the plane so that no three of its edges are pairwise crossing. It is shown that the maximum number of edges of a quasi-planar graph with n vertices is $O(n)$.

1 Introduction

We say that an undirected graph $G(V, E)$ without loops or parallel edges is *drawn* in the plane if each vertex $v \in V$ is represented by a distinct point and each edge $e = (u, v) \in E$ is

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represented by a Jordan arc connecting the points representing u and v . Throughout this paper, we assume that any two arcs of a drawing have at most one point in common, which is either a common endpoint or a common interior point where the two arcs cross each other. We do not make any notational distinction between vertices of G and the corresponding points in the plane, or between edges of G and the corresponding Jordan arcs.

A graph that can be drawn in the plane without crossing edges is planar. We call a graph *quasi-planar* if it can be drawn in the plane with no three pairwise crossing edges. The aim of this paper is to establish an $O(n)$ upper bound on the number of edges in any quasi-planar graph with n vertices. This improves an earlier result of Pach et al. [7], who had shown that a quasi-planar graph with n vertices has $O(n \log^2 n)$ edges. This is a special case of a more general result, in which one assumes that G can be drawn in the plane with no k pairwise crossing edges, for some constant $k \geq 3$. It is shown in [7] that in this case the number of edges of G is $O(n \log^{2k-4} n)$. Using our main result, we also improve these bounds to $O(n \log^{2k-6} n)$, as shown in Section 3. A linear upper bound was proved by Capoleas and Pach [1] for a special case of this problem. Many other related problems and results can be found in the book by Pach and Agarwal [6].

Theorem 1.1 *If $G(V, E)$ is a quasi-planar graph, then $|E| = O(|V|)$.*

We prove this theorem in Section 2, and in Section 3 we consider some related problems and generalizations.

2 Proof of Theorem 1.1

To simplify our presentation, we only prove the theorem in the special case when G has a straight-line drawing with no three pairwise crossing edges (straight line segments). Remarkably, the proof for the general case requires only minor modification.

The set of edges $E = E(G)$ defines a cell complex in the plane, whose 0-, 1-, and 2-dimensional cells will be called *nodes*, *segments*, and *faces*, respectively. This cell complex is known as the *arrangement* of E and is denoted by $\mathcal{A}(E)$. More specifically, the nodes of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ are the endpoints and crossings of graph edges, a segment of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ is a portion of a graph edge between two consecutive nodes, and a face of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ is a connected component of the complement of the union of E . (To avoid ambiguity, we hereafter refer to vertices and edges of G , and to the corresponding points and line segments in the plane, as “graph vertices” and “graph edges,” respectively.) Let X be the set of crossings of graph edges, $N = V \cup X$ the set of all nodes of $\mathcal{A}(E)$, S the set of its segments, and F the set of its faces. For a face $f \in F$, the *complexity* $|f|$ of f is the number of segments of S on the boundary ∂f of f . As customary, if both sides of a segment are incident to the interior of f , then it contributes 2 to $|f|$. Let $t(E) = |\{f \in F : |f| = 3\}|$ be the number of triangular faces in F .

Lemma 2.1 *Let $G(V, E)$ be a graph drawn in the plane. Then the total complexity of all non-quadrilateral faces of the arrangement $\mathcal{A}(E)$ is at most $8t(E) + 20|V|$.*

Proof: It is sufficient to prove the lemma with the assumption that the planar graph (N, S) is connected and $|S| > 1$.

Recall the following familiar facts:

$$\sum_{f \in F} |f| = 2|S| ,$$

$$2|S| = \sum_{v \in N} \deg(v) = \sum_{v \in V} \deg(v) + \sum_{v \in X} \deg(v) \geq 2|E| + 4|X| ,$$

and

$$|V| + |X| + |F| = |N| + |F| = |S| + 2 .$$

The first two lines just express two different ways of counting the edges of the planar graph (N, S) , as the sum of face complexities and of vertex degrees, respectively. The third line is Euler's relation. These easily yield

$$\sum_{f \in F} |f| \leq 4|V| + 4|F| - 2|E| - 8, \quad \text{hence} \quad \sum_{f \in F} (|f| - 4) \leq 4|V| .$$

Finally, since $|f| > 4$ implies $|f| \leq 5(|f| - 4)$, we have

$$\sum_{f \in F, |f| \neq 4} |f| = 3t(E) + 5 \sum_{f \in F, |f| \geq 4} (|f| - 4) = 8t(E) + 5 \sum_{f \in F} (|f| - 4) \leq 8t(E) + 20|V| .$$

□

Lemma 2.2 *Let $G(V, E)$ be a quasi-planar graph drawn in the plane. Then the overall complexity of all faces f of $\mathcal{A}(E)$, such that f is either a non-quadrilateral face or a quadrilateral face incident to at least one vertex of G , is $O(|V| + |E|)$.*

Proof: We first claim that $t(E) = O(|E|)$. Indeed, each triangular face f of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ must be incident to a vertex of G , for otherwise there would be three pairwise crossing edges in G . It is easy to check that the number of faces of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ incident to graph vertices is at most $2|E|$, so our claim follows. In addition, this implies that the overall complexity of all quadrilateral faces of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ incident to a graph vertex in V is also $O(|E|)$. The lemma is now an immediate consequence of Lemma 2.1. □

Let $G(V, E)$ be a quasi-planar graph drawn in the plane with $n = |V|$ vertices. Returning to the proof of Theorem 1.1, we may assume without loss of generality that G is connected, because it suffices to establish a linear bound on the number of graph edges in each connected component of G . Let $G_0 = (V, E_0)$ be a spanning tree of G , so $|E_0| = n - 1$. Let $E^* = E \setminus E_0$.

Note that each face of the arrangement $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ is simply connected, for otherwise the union of nodes and segments of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ would not be connected, contradicting the connectedness of G_0 . Moreover, by Lemma 2.2, the complexity of all those faces of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ which are either non-quadrilaterals or quadrilaterals incident to a point in V is $O(n)$. We refer to the remaining faces of $\mathcal{A}(E)$ as *crossing quadrilaterals*. See Figure 1 for an illustration.

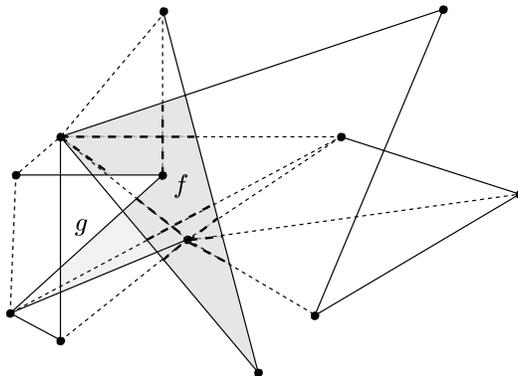


Figure 1: The arrangement $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$: the edges of E_0 are drawn in solid; the face g is a crossing quadrilateral; the edges of E^* are drawn as dotted, and their portions within the face f , forming $X(f)$, are dashed.

In the sequel, we use the following notion. A graph is called an *overlap graph* if its vertices can be represented by intervals on a line so that two vertices are adjacent if and only if the corresponding intervals overlap but neither of them contains the other [2]. Gyarfas [3] (see also [4]) has shown that every triangle-free overlap graph can be colored by a constant number, c , of colors, and Kostochka [5] proved that this is true with $c = 5$.

For each graph edge $e \in E^*$, let $\Xi(e)$ denote the set of segments of $\mathcal{A}(E_0 \cup \{e\})$ that are contained in e . In other words, it is the set of segments into which e is cut by the graph edges of E_0 . By construction, each segment $s \in \Xi(e)$ is fully contained in a face of $f \in \mathcal{A}(E_0)$ and its two endpoints lie on the unique connected component of ∂f . For each face f of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$, let $X(f)$ denote the set of all segments in $\bigcup_{e \in E^*} \Xi(e)$ that are contained in f , and let $H(f)$ denote the quasi-planar graph whose set of edges is $X(f)$. Since f is simply connected, any two segments in $X(f)$ cross each other if and only if their endpoints interleave along the boundary of f . By cutting the boundary of f so that it becomes an (image of an open) interval and associating with each segment in $X(f)$ the connected subinterval along the boundary of f between its endpoints, we obtain a collection of intervals with the property that two elements of $X(f)$ cross if and only if the corresponding intervals overlap and neither is contained in the other. This defines a triangle-free overlap graph on the vertex set $X(f)$. Therefore the segments of $X(f)$ can be colored by at most five colors, so that no two segments with the same color cross each other. (Note that, for a graph edge $e \in E^*$, several segments in $\Xi(e)$ may be contained in the same face f and thus belong to the same $X(f)$. These segments may be colored by different colors.)

Let f be a face of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ other than a crossing quadrilateral, and let $H_1(f), \dots, H_5(f)$ be the monochromatic subgraphs of $H(f)$ obtained by the above coloring. Fix one of these subgraphs, say $H_1(f)$, and re-interpret it as a graph whose vertices are the (relative interiors of the) edges of ∂f together with the elements of V on ∂f , and whose edges are the segments of $H_1(f)$. The resulting graph, $H_1^*(f)$, is clearly planar. We call a face of $H_1^*(f)$ a *digon* if it is bounded by exactly two edges of $H_1^*(f)$, and we call an edge of $H_1^*(f)$ *shielded* if both of the faces incident to it are digons. The remaining edges of $H_1^*(f)$ are called *exposed*. See Figure 2. Observe that, by Euler's formula, there are at most $O(n_f)$ exposed edges in $H_1^*(f)$, where n_f is the number of vertices of $H_1^*(f)$, which is at most $2|f|$.

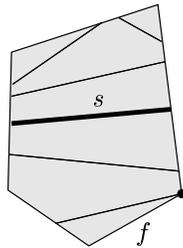


Figure 2: A monochromatic subgraph $H_1(f)$ of the graph $H(f)$. The segment s is a shielded edge of $H_1^*(f)$; all other edges of $H_1^*(f)$ are exposed.

We repeat this analysis for each of the other subgraphs $H_2(f), \dots, H_5(f)$, and for all faces f of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ other than crossing quadrilaterals. It follows that the number of graph edges $e \in E^*$ containing at least one exposed segment (in the graph $H_i^*(f)$ containing it) is $O(\sum_f |f|)$, where the sum extends over all such faces f . By Lemma 2.2, this sum is $O(n)$.

It thus remains to bound the number of graph edges in E^* with no exposed subsegment; we call these edges *shielded*, borrowing the terminology used above. If e is a shielded graph edge, then, for each $s \in \Xi(e)$, either s lies in a crossing quadrilateral face of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$, or else s is shielded (in the corresponding subgraph). Note that no graph edge $e \in E^*$ can consist solely of segments passing through crossing quadrilaterals, as the first and last segments necessarily meet faces of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ that have at least one graph vertex on their boundary, namely an endpoint of e .

Lemma 2.3 *There are no shielded graph edges.*

Proof: Suppose that $e \in E^*$ is shielded. Let a and b be the endpoints of e , and let s_1, \dots, s_k denote the segments in $\Xi(e)$, appearing along e in their order from a to b . We claim that there exists a graph edge $e^+ \in E^*$ that satisfies the following properties:

- (1) e^+ is a graph edge of E^* emanating from a next to e , and
- (2) for each segment $s_i \in \Xi(e)$, there is a corresponding segment $s_i^+ \in \Xi(e^+)$, such that s_i and s_i^+ connect the same pair of segments of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$, for $i = 2, \dots, k-1$, s_1 and s_1^+

connect a to the same segment of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$, and s_k and s_k^+ connect the same segment of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ to b .

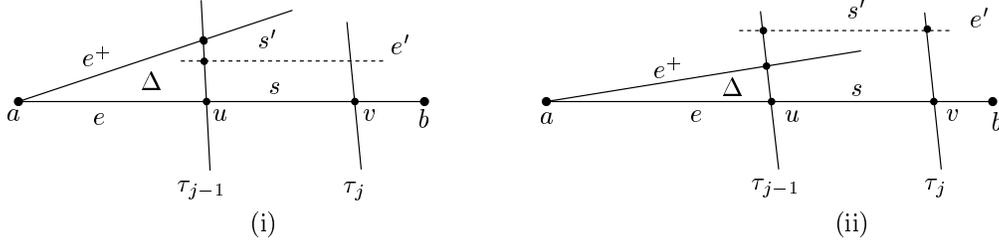


Figure 3: Illustration to the proof of Lemma 2.3: (i) e' crosses τ_{j-1} between e and e^+ ; (ii) e^+ crosses τ_{j-1} between e and e' .

The first segment s_1 connects a with some edge τ_1 of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ (note that $s_1 \neq e$ when e is shielded). Since s_1 is shielded, there exists another graph edge $e^+ \in E^*$ with a subsegment $s_1^+ \in \Xi(e^+)$ that connects a to τ_1 . Clearly, we can choose e^+ with these properties to be the graph edge emanating from a nearest to e (either clockwise or counterclockwise).

We now prove, by induction on j , that e^+ satisfies condition (2) of the claim for all s_1, \dots, s_j . This is clearly true for $j = 1$. Next, assume that $j > 1$ and that the assertion is true for $j - 1$. Suppose that s_j connects two segments τ_{j-1} and τ_j of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ such that $u = \tau_{j-1} \cap e$ is the common endpoint of s_{j-1} and s_j , and $v = \tau_j \cap e$ is the other endpoint of s_j . (If $j = k$ then we take τ_j and v to be the other endpoint b of e .) If the face f of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ containing s_j is a crossing quadrilateral, then, as is easily verified, e and e^+ must cross the same pair of opposite edges of f , completing the induction step. Otherwise, since s_j is shielded, there is a graph edge $e' \in E^*$ and a subsegment $s' \in \Xi(e')$ that connects τ_{j-1} and τ_j on the same side of s_j as e^+ . Three cases can arise:

- $e' = e^+$: The induction step is complete.
- e' crosses τ_{j-1} at a point that lies between u and the crossing with e^+ (see Figure 3(i)): Since G is quasi-planar, e' cannot cross e or e^+ . Moreover, e' cannot have an endpoint within the interior of the triangle Δ bounded by e , e^+ , and τ_{j-1} , by the induction hypothesis and the fact that all faces of $\mathcal{A}(E_0)$ are simply connected. Hence, e' must end at a and lie inside Δ near a . However, this contradicts the choice of e^+ as the closest neighbor of e near a . Thus this case is impossible.
- e^+ crosses τ_{j-1} at a point that lies between u and the crossing with e' (see Figure 3(ii)): In this case, e^+ cannot cross s_j or s' or terminate inside f . Thus, it must meet τ_j . This completes the induction step and hence the proof of the claim.

Note that the same analysis also applies when $j = k$, that is, when τ_j is the endpoint b of e . Therefore, e and e^+ have the same pair of endpoints, contradicting the assumption that G has no parallel edges. This completes the proof of the lemma. \square

As there are no shielded edges, the total number of edges of E^* , and thus also of E , is $O(n)$. This completes the proof of Theorem 1.1.

As noted at the beginning of the analysis, the same proof also applies to the case where the edges of G are drawn as Jordan arcs, except that one has to handle more carefully several terms used in the proof, such as the side of an edge, order of edges around a common vertex, etc.

3 Discussion

In this section we discuss some consequences of the above results.

Theorem 3.1 *Let $G(V, E)$ be a graph with n vertices that can be drawn in the plane with no four pairwise crossing edges. Then the number of edges of G is $O(n \log^2 n)$.*

Proof: We first estimate the number C of crossings between the edges of G . Let e be an edge of G , and let G_e be the subgraph of G consisting of all edges that cross e . Then G_e is a quasi-planar graph. Thus, by Theorem 1.1, the number of edges of G_e is $O(n)$, which implies that $C = O(n|E|)$. One can then combine this estimate with the analysis in [7], to conclude that $|E| = O(n \log^2 n)$. \square

Corollary 3.2 *Let $k \geq 4$ be an integer, and let G be a graph with n vertices that can be drawn in the plane with no k pairwise crossing edges. Then the number of edges of G is $O(n \log^{2k-6} n)$.*

Proof: This is an immediate consequence of the analysis in [7], which proceeds by induction on k , based on the improved bound of Theorem 3.1 for $k = 4$. \square

Theorem 3.1 and Corollary 3.2 improve the bounds given in [7] by a factor of $\Theta(\log^2 n)$.

There are several interesting problems that are left open in this paper. The first problem is to find the best constant of proportionality in the bound of Theorem 1.1. A trivial lower bound is roughly $6n$, obtained by overlaying two edge-disjoint triangulations of the same point set. The constant 6 can be slightly increased.

Another open problem is as follows. For a quasi-planar graph G , let $\chi = \chi(G)$ be the smallest number with the property that the edges of G can be colored with χ colors, so that the edges in each color class do not cross each other (and thus form a planar graph). Clearly, if G has n vertices, then the number of edges of G is at most $3\chi(G)n$. Thus, a plausible conjecture is that $\chi(G)$ is bounded from above by a constant. Recall that this conjecture is true, with $\chi(G) \leq 5$, if there exists a plane drawing of G in which no three edges are pairwise crossing and the vertices are in convex position (see also [3, 4] for a

weaker constant bound and for related results concerning more general classes of graphs). Moreover, if there exists such a drawing of G in which the vertices lie on two parallel lines, then one can easily show that $\chi(G) \leq 2$. Does there exist a constant upper bound for $\chi(G)$ when all edges of G cross a common line? A weaker conjecture is that there exists a subset E' of pairwise noncrossing edges of G such that $|E'| \geq \beta|E|$ for some absolute constant $\beta > 0$. The existence of such a subset E' would imply, by planarity, that $|E'| = O(n)$, which would provide another proof of Theorem 1.1.

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