SPHERES OF SMALL DIAMETER WITH LONG SWEEP-OUTS

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Abstract. We prove the absence of a universal diameter bound on lengths of curves in a sweep-out of a Riemannian 2-sphere. If such a bound existed it would yield a simple proof of the existence of short geodesic segments and closed geodesics on a sphere of small diameter.

1. Introduction

By a sweep-out of a Riemannian 2-sphere \( M = (S^2, g) \) we mean a noncontractible loop \( \gamma_t \) in \( (\Lambda M, \Lambda^0 M) \), where \( \Lambda M \) denotes the space of free loops on \( M \) and \( \Lambda^0 M \) denotes the space of constant loops. In other words, \( \gamma_t \) is a 1-parameter family of closed curves starting and ending at a point and inducing a nonzero degree map \( f : S^2 \to M \). If there exists a sweep-out by loops of length \( \leq L \), then the standard minimax argument implies that there exists a nontrivial closed geodesic on \( M \) of length \( \leq L \) \[B\].

Moreover, A. Nabutovsky and R. Rotman demonstrate in \[NR1\] that existence of a certain sweep-out, called an \( L \)-slicing, of the sphere by loops of length \( \leq 2L \) implies that for any two points \( a, b \in M \) there exist \( k \) distinct geodesic segments from \( a \) to \( b \) of length \( \leq 2kL + 2diam(M) \). If we could take \( L \leq Cdiam(M) \) we would obtain a linear in \( k \) bound on the length of the \( k \)-th shortest geodesic segment in terms of the diameter.

Yet A. Nabutovsky and R. Rotman observe (see \[N\], \[NR1\], \[NR2\]) that an example of S. Frankel and M. Katz \[FK\] (see below) suggests that for any \( C \) there exists a sphere with no sweep-out obeying this inequality. The author learned from Regina Rotman that a similar conjecture was independently made by S. Sabourau. In this paper we prove this conjecture.

2. Main result

Let \( \gamma : I \times S^1 \to M \) be a 1-parameter family of free loops (we write \( \gamma_t(s) \) for \( \gamma(t, s) \)), such that \( \gamma_0(s) \) and \( \gamma_1(s) \) are constant loops. \( \gamma \) induces a map \( f : S^2 \to M \), such that \( \gamma(t, s) = f \circ p(t, s) \), where \( p : I \times S^1 \to S^2 \) is the suspension map that collapses \( \{0\} \times S^1 \) to the south pole and \( \{1\} \times S^1 \) to the north pole of \( S^2 \). If \( deg(f) \neq 0 \) we call \( \gamma_t \) a sweep-out.

Theorem 1. For any \( C > 0 \) there exists a Riemannian 2-sphere \( M \) of diameter \( \leq 1 \), such that for any sweep-out \( \gamma_t \) of \( M \) there is a loop \( \gamma_{t_0} \) of length \( \geq C \).
F. Balacheff and S. Sabourau defined a diastole of $M$ as

$$\text{dias}(M) := \inf_{(\gamma_t)} \sup_{0 \leq t \leq 1} \text{length}(\gamma_t),$$

where $(\gamma_t)$ runs over the families of loops inducing $f : S^2 \to M$ of degree $\pm 1$. In [S, Remark 4.10] S. Sabourau constructs a sequence $M_n$ of Riemannian two-spheres such that

$$\lim_{n \to \infty} \frac{\sqrt{\text{Area}(M_n)}}{\text{dias}(M_n)} = 0.$$ 

Theorem 1 implies an analogous result with diam$(M_n)$ in place of $\sqrt{\text{Area}(M_n)}$.

F. Balacheff and S. Sabourau prove [BS] that if 1-parameter families of loops in the definition of the diastole are replaced with 1-parameter families of one-cycles, then every Riemannian 2-sphere satisfies $\text{dias}(M) \leq C\sqrt{\text{Area}(M)}$ for a universal constant $C$.

**Proof.** We use an example of S. Frankel and M. Katz [FK]. For any natural number $N$ they embed a binary tree $T$ of height $N$ in a 2-dimensional disc $D$ and define a Riemannian metric on $D$, such that the distance between any two nonadjacent edges of $T$ is $\text{dist}(e_i, e_j) \geq 1/2$, but the diameter $\text{diam}(D) \leq 1$. They prove that for every homotopy of closed curves $\gamma_t$ with $\gamma_0 = \partial D$ and $\gamma_1 = \{\ast\}$ there is an intermediate curve $\gamma_{t_0}$ that intersects $O(N/\log N)$ edges of $T$ (i.e. $\geq C' \frac{N}{\log N}$ for some universal constant $C' > 0$ and all big enough $N$). They conclude that $\gamma_{t_0}$ has length $O(N/\log N)$.

Let $M = (S^2, g)$ be a sphere of diameter less than 1 containing a disc $D$ of Frankel and Katz with an embedded binary tree $T$ of height $N$. Consider a sweep-out $\gamma_t$ and let $f : S^2 \to M$ be the induced map from the suspension of $S^1$ to $M$ ($\gamma_t(s) = f \circ p(t,s)$).

Suppose that at some time $t_0 \in [0,1]$, $\gamma_{t_0}$ does not pass through a vertex $v \in T$. Let $E$ denote a connected component of $M \setminus \gamma_{t_0}$ that contains $v$. Identify all points of $M \setminus E$ to a new point $x$ to obtain a quotient space $E \cup \{x\}$ homeomorphic to $S^2$.

The loop $p(t_0,s)$ divides $S^2$ into two connected components, the south component $S_{t_0} = \{p(t,s) : t < t_0\}$ and the north component $N_{t_0} = \{p(t,s) : t > t_0\}$. A composition of $f$ with the quotient map $q_1 : M \to E \cup \{x\}$ maps the loop $p(t_0,s)$ to the point $x$. If we collapse all points of $p(t_0,s)$ to a point $y$, we obtain a map $f_{t_0,v} : S_{t_0} \cup \{y\} \cup N_{t_0} \to E \cup \{q\}$, where the quotient space $S_{t_0} \cup \{y\} \cup N_{t_0}$ is homeomorphic to the wedge sum $S^2 \vee S^2$. We have the following commutative diagram:

$$
\begin{array}{ccc}
S^2 & \xrightarrow{f} & M \\
q_2 \downarrow & & \downarrow q_1 \\
S_{t_0} \cup \{y\} \cup N_{t_0} & \xrightarrow{f_{t_0,v}} & E \cup \{x\}
\end{array}
$$

Let $f_{t_0,v}^S$ denote the restriction of $f_{t_0,v}$ to the south sphere $S_{t_0} \cup \{y\}$ and $f_{t_0,v}^N$ denote the restriction to the north sphere $N_{t_0} \cup \{y\}$. Observe that from the induced commutative diagram for the second homology groups we have $\deg(f) = \deg(f_{t_0,v}^S) + \deg(f_{t_0,v}^N)$. Indeed, the map $q_{1Z} : H_2(S^2) \to H_2(S^2 \vee S^2)$ sends a generator $1$ to an element $(1,1) \in \mathbb{Z} \times \mathbb{Z}$ and $(f_{t_0,v}^S)_z(a,b) = (f_{t_0,v}^S)_z(a) + (f_{t_0,v}^N)_z(b)$, while $q_{1Z}$ is an isomorphism.
Let $A \subset [0, 1]$ denote the set of all $t$ such that $\gamma_t$ does not pass through $v$. We define a function $d_v : A \to \mathbb{N}$ (degree of $v$ at time $t$) by
\begin{equation}
\label{e:degree}
d_v(t) = \deg(f^N_{t,v}).
\end{equation}

We need two simple facts about $d_v(t)$.

**Observation 1.** If $\gamma_t$ does not pass through $v$ for $t \in [t_1, t_2]$, then $d_v(t)$ is constant on $[t_1, t_2]$.

*Proof.* Choose a small disc $D$ around $v$ such that $D \cap f(p([t_1, t_2]))$ is empty and define a quotient map $q$ collapsing $M \setminus D$ to a point. For each $t \in [t_1, t_2]$ we can define a map between spheres $q' : N_t \cup \{a\} \to N_{t_2} \cup \{b\}$ sending $N_t \setminus N_{t_2}$ to $b$. Then $q \circ f^N_{t,v} = q \circ f^N_{t_2,v} \circ q'$. As $\deg(q) = \deg(q') = 1$ we have $\deg(f^N_{t,v}) = \deg(f^N_{t_2,v})$.

**Observation 2.** Let $v_1$, $v_2$ be two vertices of $T$ connected by an edge $e$. If $\gamma_t$ does not intersect $e$, then $d_{v_1}(t) = d_{v_2}(t)$.

*Proof.* Since $\gamma_t$ does not intersect $e$, $v_1$ and $v_2$ belong to the same connected component of $M \setminus \gamma_t$. Hence, $f^N_{t,v_1} = f^N_{t,v_2}$.

Without any loss of generality we may assume that the images of north and south poles under $f$ are not vertices of $T$. We observe that $d_v(0) = \deg(f) \neq 0$ and $d_v(1) = 0$ for all vertices $v$.

The rest of the proof proceeds as in [FK]. Let $V$ be the set of vertices of $T$ and $K(t) = \#\{v \in V : d_v(t) = 0\}$. We may perturb the homotopy slightly, so that $\gamma_t$ passes through no more than one vertex for each $t$. Observation 1 implies that as $t$ varies between 0 and 1, $K(t)$ will attain every value between 0 and $2^N - 1$ (recall that $N$ is the height of $T$).

Consider what values $K(t)$ can attain if $\gamma_t$ intersects only one edge of $T$. Let $v_1$ and $v_2$ be two vertices of this edge $e$ at distances (in the standard metric on the tree) $i$ and $i + 1$, respectively, from the root. By Observation 2 we have the following possibilities for the value of $K(t)$: the number of vertices in the connected component of $M \setminus \gamma_t$ that contains $v_1$ ($2^N - 2^{N-i-1}$), the number of vertices in the connected component that contains $v_2$ ($2^N - i - 1$) or one of the min or max values ($0$ and $2^N - 1$). Since this is true for every distance from the root $i$, $K(t)$ can attain at most $2(N - 1) + 2$ different values if $\gamma_t$ intersects only one edge of $T$. Suppose there are exactly $j$ intersections. Then the number of possible different values $K(t)$ can attain is smaller than or equal to the product of the numbers of different values it can attain for each intersection, i.e. $(2N)^j$. If throughout the homotopy $\gamma_t$ intersects at most $k$ edges, then $K(t)$ attains no more than $\sum_{j=1}^{k} (2N)^j \leq (2N)^{k+1}$ distinct values. Since all possible values are attained, we have $(2N)^{k+1} \geq 2^N - 1$, and hence $k \geq O(N/\log N)$.

Since the distance between any two nonadjacent edges is greater than $1/2$, we have that for some $t$, $\gamma_t$ will be at least $O(N/\log N)$ long.

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