SQUARE-FREE VALUES OF POLYNOMIALS OVER THE RATIONAL FUNCTION FIELD

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Abstract. We study representation of square-free polynomials in the polynomial ring $\mathbb{F}_q[t]$ over a finite field $\mathbb{F}_q$ by polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_q[t][x]$. This is a function field version of the well studied problem of representing square-free integers by integer polynomials, where it is conjectured that a separable polynomial $f \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$ takes infinitely many square-free values, barring some simple exceptional cases, in fact that the integers $a$ for which $f(a)$ is square-free have a positive density. We show that if $f(x) \in \mathbb{F}_q[t][x]$ is separable, with square-free content, of bounded degree and height, then as $q \to \infty$, for almost all monic polynomials $a(t)$, the polynomial $f(a)$ is square-free.

1. Introduction

Let $\mathbb{F}_q$ be a finite field of $q$ elements. We wish to study representation of square-free polynomials in the polynomial ring $\mathbb{F}_q[t]$ by polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_q[t][x]$. This is a function field version of the well studied problem of representing square-free integers by integer polynomials, where it is conjectured that a separable polynomial $f \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$ takes infinitely many square-free values, barring some simple exceptional cases, in fact that the integers $a$ for which $f(a)$ is square-free have a positive density. The problem is most difficult when $f$ is irreducible. The quadratic case was solved by Ricci [12]. For cubics, Erdős [2] showed that there are infinitely many square-free values, and Hooley [6] gave the result about positive density. Beyond that nothing seems known unconditionally for irreducible $f$, for instance it is still not known that $a^4 + 2$ is infinitely often square-free. Granville [3] showed that the ABC conjecture completely settles this problem. An easier problem which has recently been solved is to ask how often an irreducible polynomial $f \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$ of degree $d$ attains values which are free of $(d-1)$-th powers, either when evaluated at integers or at primes, see [2, 7, 8, 9, 5, 11, 14, 13].

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In this note we study a function field version of this problem. Given a polynomial \( f(x) = \sum_{j} \gamma_j(t)x^j \in \mathbb{F}[t][x] \) which is separable, that is with no repeated roots in any extension of \( \mathbb{F}_q(t) \), we want to know how often is \( f(a) \) square-free in \( \mathbb{F}_q[t] \) as \( a \) runs over (monic) polynomials in \( \mathbb{F}_q[t] \).

We want to rule out polynomials like \( f(x, t) = t^2x \) for which \( f(a(t), t) \) can never be square-free. To do so, recall that the content \( c \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \) of a polynomial \( f \in \mathbb{F}_q[t][x] \) as above is defined as the greatest common divisor of the coefficients of \( f \): \( c = \gcd(\gamma_0, \ldots, \gamma_{\ell}) \). A polynomial is primitive if \( c = 1 \), and any \( f \in \mathbb{F}_q[t][x] \) can be written as \( f = cf_0 \) where \( f_0 \) is primitive.

If the content \( c \) is not square-free then \( f(a) \) can never be square-free.

For any field \( \mathbb{F} \), let
\[ M_n(\mathbb{F}) = \{ a \in \mathbb{F}[t] : \deg a = n, a \text{ monic} \}, \]
so that \( \#M_n(\mathbb{F}_q) = q^n \). Defining
\[ S_f(n)(\mathbb{F}) = \{ a \in M_n(\mathbb{F}) : f(a) \text{ is square-free} \}, \]
we want to study the frequency
\[ \frac{\#S_f(n)(\mathbb{F}_q)}{\#M_n(\mathbb{F}_q)} \]
in an appropriate limit.

There are two possible limits to take: Large degree \( (n \to \infty) \) while keeping the constant field \( \mathbb{F}_q \) fixed, or large constant field \( (q \to \infty) \) while keeping \( n \) fixed. The large degree limit \( (q \text{ fixed, } n \to \infty) \) was investigated by Ramsay \[11\] who showed:

**Theorem 1.1.** Assume \( f \in \mathbb{F}_q[t][x] \) is separable and irreducible. Then
\[ \frac{\#S_f(n)(\mathbb{F}_q)}{\#M_n(\mathbb{F}_q)} = c_f + O_{f,q}(\frac{1}{n}), \text{ as } n \to \infty, \]
with
\[ c_f = \prod_P (1 - \frac{\rho_f(P^2)}{|P|^2}), \]
the product over prime polynomials \( P \), and for any polynomial \( D \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \),
\[ \rho_f(D) = \#\{ C \text{ mod } D : f(C) = 0 \text{ mod } D \}. \]
The implied constant depends on \( f \) and on the finite field size \( q \). The density \( c_f \) is positive if and only if there is some \( a \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \) such that \( f(a) \) is square-free.

Ramsay actually counts all polynomials up to degree \( n \), and does not impose the monic condition. See also Poonen \[10\] for multi-variable versions.

Ramsay’s theorem is proved by an elementary sieve argument, with one crucial novel ingredient due to Elkies to deal with the contribution of large primes to the sieve, which is completely unavailable in the number field case; in Granville’s work \[3\], the ABC conjecture plays an analogous rôle.

In this note we deal with the large finite field limit, of \( q \to \infty \) while \( n \) is fixed. Here it makes little sense to fix the polynomial \( f \), so we also allow
variable \( f \), as long as restrict the degree (in \( x \)) and height, where for a polynomial \( f(x,t) = \sum_j \gamma_j(t)x^j \in \mathbb{F}[t][x] \), the height is \( \text{Ht}(f) = \max_j \deg \gamma_j(t) \).

We will show

**Theorem 1.2.** For all separable \( f \in \mathbb{F}_{q}[t][x] \) with square-free content, as \( q \to \infty \),

\[
\frac{\#S_f(n)(\mathbb{F}_q)}{\#M_n(\mathbb{F}_q)} = 1 + O\left(\frac{(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f)) \deg f}{q}\right),
\]

the implied constant absolute.

Thus if we fix \( n \), the degree and the height, as \( q \to \infty \) for almost all \( a \in M_n(\mathbb{F}_q) \), the polynomials \( f(a) \) are square-free. For instance, the number of monic polynomials of given degree in \( \mathbb{F}_q[t] \), we in particular find that for almost all primes \( P \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \) of given degree, the polynomial \( f(P) \) is square-free as \( q \to \infty \).

Remark: It is possible to have primitive, separable \( f \) with no square-free values, for instance take

\[
f(x) = \prod_{\alpha, \beta \in \mathbb{F}_q} (x - \alpha t - \beta) = x^{2q} + \ldots .
\]

Then for all \( a \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \), \( f(a) \) is divisible by \( (\prod_{\gamma \in \mathbb{F}_q} (t - \gamma))^2 = (t^q - t)^2 \). Indeed, if we fix \( \gamma \in \mathbb{F}_q \), any \( a \in \mathbb{F}_q[t] \) is congruent modulo \( (t - \gamma)^2 \) to some \( \alpha t + \beta \) and hence \( f(a) \equiv f(\alpha t + \beta) \equiv 0 \mod (t - \gamma)^2 \). Thus we need to impose some restriction on the degree of \( f \) in Theorem 1.2.

Theorem 1.2 is a consequence of a purely algebraic result, valid over any field \( \mathbb{F} \).

**Theorem 1.3.** Suppose \( f \in \mathbb{F}[t][x] \) is separable over \( \mathbb{F}(t) \) and has square-free content. Then \( S_f(n)(\mathbb{F}) \) is the complement of a proper Zariski-closed hypersurface of the affine \( n \)-dimensional space \( M_n(\mathbb{F}) \), of degree \( D \leq 2(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f)) \deg f \).

Theorem 1.3 implies that the number of \( a \in M_n(\mathbb{F}_q) \) for which \( f(a) \) is not square-free is at most \( Dq^n - 1 \), where \( D \) is the total degree of an equation defining the hypersurface. Indeed, if \( h \in \mathbb{F}_q[X_1, \ldots, X_m] \) is a non-zero polynomial of total degree at most \( D \), then the number of zeros of \( h(X_1, \ldots, X_m) \) in \( \mathbb{F}_q^m \) is at most \( Dq^{m-1} \). This is an elementary fact, seen by fixing all variables but one (cf [14, §4, Lemma 3.1]). Hence Theorem 1.2 follows.

2. Proof of Theorem 1.3

2.1. The primitive case. We write

\[
f(x,t) = \gamma_0(t) + \gamma_1(t)x + \cdots + \gamma_\ell(t)x^\ell
\]
with $\gamma_j(t) \in \mathbb{F}[t]$, and $\gamma_\ell(t) \neq 0$. We first assume that $f(x, t)$ is primitive, that is $\gcd(\gamma_j(t)) = 1$. Denote by

$$\Delta_f(t) = \text{disc}_x f(x, t)$$

the discriminant of $f(x)$ as a polynomial of degree $\ell$ with coefficients in $\mathbb{F}[t]$; it is a universal polynomial with integer coefficients in $\gamma_0(t), \ldots, \gamma_\ell(t)$:

$$\Delta_f(t) = \text{Poly}_\mathbb{Z}(\gamma_0(t), \ldots, \gamma_\ell(t)) \in \mathbb{F}[t].$$

Separability of $f$ (over $\mathbb{F}(t)$) is equivalent to the discriminant not being the zero polynomial: $\Delta_f(t) \neq 0$.

The key observation is that $f(a) \in \mathbb{F}[t]$ being square-free is equivalent to requiring that the polynomial $t \mapsto f(a(t), t)$ does not have any multiple zeros (in any extension of the field $\mathbb{F}$). This is in fact a polynomial condition, that is a polynomial system of equations for the coefficients $a_0, a_1, \ldots, a_{n-1}$ of $a(t) = a_0 + a_1 t + \cdots + a_{n-1} t^{n-1} + t^n$ which is given by the vanishing of the discriminant:

$$\text{disc } f(a(t), t) = 0.$$

It suffices to show that this equation defines a proper hypersurface.

Before doing so, we bound the degree $D$ of the hypersurface (2.4): For $f(x, t)$ as in (2.1), $f(a(t), t)$ is a polynomial in $t$ of degree

$$\deg f(a(t), t) \leq n \deg f + \max \deg \gamma_j = n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f).$$

The coefficients are polynomials in the $a_j$ of degree at most $\deg f$. Now the discriminant of a polynomial $\sum_{j=0}^m h_j t^j$ is homogeneous in the coefficients $h_j$ of degree $2m - 2$. Hence $a \mapsto \text{disc } f(a(t), t) = \sum_k \delta_k \prod a_i^{h_i}$ has total degree at most

$$D \leq 2(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f)) \deg f.$$

It remains to show that the equation (2.4) is nontrivial.

The condition that the polynomial $f(a(t))$ has multiple zeros is that there is some $\rho \in \overline{\mathbb{F}}$ (an algebraic closure of $\mathbb{F}$) with

$$f(a(\rho), \rho) = 0, \quad \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}(a(\rho), \rho) \cdot a'(\rho) + \frac{\partial f}{\partial t}(a(\rho), \rho) = 0.$$

we define

$$W = \{ (\rho, \vec{a}) \in \mathbb{A}^1 \times \mathbb{A}^n : (2.7) \text{ holds} \}.$$

We have a fibration of $W$ over the $\rho$ line $\mathbb{A}^1$ and a map $\phi : W \to \mathbb{A}^n$, the restriction of the projection $\mathbb{A}^1 \times \mathbb{A}^n \to \mathbb{A}^n$.

$$W \subset \mathbb{A}^1 \times \mathbb{A}^n$$

and the solutions of (2.7) are precisely $\phi(W)$. 

\[ \begin{array}{ccc}
\mathbb{A}^1 & \xrightarrow{\pi} & \mathbb{A}^1 \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \phi \\
\mathbb{A}^n & & \mathbb{A}^n 
\end{array} \]
We will show that generically the fiber $\pi^{-1}(\rho)$ has dimension $n - 2$ and for at most finitely many $\rho$ the dimension is $n - 1$. Therefore we obtain that $\dim W = n - 1$. Since the solutions of (2.17) are precisely $\phi(W)$, it follows that $\dim \phi(W) \leq n - 1$. This will conclude the proof of Theorem 1.3 in the primitive case.

We note that for primitive polynomials, $f(x, \rho) = \sum_j \gamma_j(\rho)x^j$ is not the zero polynomial for any $\rho \in \mathbb{F}$. Thus for each $\rho \in \mathbb{F}$, the condition $f(a(\rho), \rho) = 0$ constrains $a$ to solve an equation $a(\rho) = \beta$, where $\beta \in \mathbb{F}$ is on of the at most $\deg f$ roots of $f(x, \rho)$.

We separate into two cases: The singular case when $\frac{\partial f}{\partial x}(a(\rho), \rho) = 0$ and the generic case when we require $\frac{\partial f}{\partial x}(a(\rho), \rho) \neq 0$.

The singular case implies that $\beta$ is a multiple zero of the polynomial $f(x, \rho)$, that is that $\rho$ is a zero of the discriminant $\Delta_f(t)$, which is not identically zero (since we assume $f$ is separable) and hence there are only finitely many possibilities for such $\rho$. Given one of those $\rho$, then we need $a(t)$ to satisfy $a(\rho) = \beta$, i.e.

$$a_0 + a_1 \rho + \cdots + a_{n-1} \rho^{n-1} + \rho^n = \beta$$

which is a (non-degenerate) linear equation, and therefore carves out an $n-1$-dimensional subspace of $a$’s. Thus the singular locus consists of at most finitely many hyperplanes, and hence if non-empty has dimension $n - 1$.

In the generic case, we substitute $a(\rho) = \beta$ into (2.7) to get a system

$$a(\rho) = \beta, \quad a'(\rho) = -\frac{\partial f}{\partial t}(\beta, \rho)$$

that is

$$a_0 + a_1 \rho + a_2 \rho^2 + \cdots + a_{n-1} \rho^{n-1} = -\rho^n + \beta$$

$$a_1 + a_2 \cdot 2 \rho + \cdots + a_{n-1} \cdot (n-1) \rho^{n-2} = -n \rho^{n-1} - \frac{\partial f}{\partial t}(\beta, \rho)$$

which is clearly of rank 2. Hence the fibers $\pi^{-1}(\rho)$ have dimension $n - 2$.

2.2. The general case. We now relax the primitivity condition. Write $f(x, t) = c(t)f_0(x, t)$ where $f_0(x, t) = \sum_j \gamma_j(0)(t)x^j$ is primitive, and $c(t) \in \mathbb{F}_q[t]$ is square-free. Since $c(t)$ is square-free, we obtain that $f(a(t), t)$ is square-free if and only if $f_0(a(t), t)$ is square-free and coprime to $c(t)$. Now $f_0(a(t), t)$ being square-free is the condition $\text{disc } f_0(a(t), t) \neq 0$. For $f_0(a)$ to not be coprime to $c$ is the algebraic condition on vanishing of the resultant

$$R = \text{Res}(c(t), f_0(a(t), t))$$

Thus the set of $a \in M_n$ so that $f(a)$ is square-free is the complement of the hypersurface

$$\text{disc } f_0(a(t), t) \cdot R(t) = 0.$$
We wish to show that this is a non-zero equation and to bound its total degree.

We have established above that the discriminant equation \( \text{disc} f_0(a(t), t) = 0 \) is nontrivial, of total degree

\[
D_0 \leq 2(n \deg f_0 + \text{Ht}(f_0)) \deg f_0 = 2(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f_0)) \deg f
\]
in \( a_0, \ldots, a_n \).

We wish to show that the resultant \( R \) is not identically zero. Assuming (as we may) that \( c(t) \) is monic, we can write the resultant as a product over the zeros of \( c(t) \)

\[
R = \prod_{c(\alpha) = 0} f_0(a(\alpha), \alpha) = \prod_{c(\alpha) = 0} \sum_{j=0}^\ell \gamma_j^{(0)}(\alpha)(a_0 + \cdots + \alpha^n)^j.
\]

For each zero \( \alpha \) of \( c(t) \), let \( \ell(\alpha) = \deg f_0(x, \alpha) \) be the degree of the polynomial \( f_0(x, \alpha) \in \mathbb{F}_q[x] \), which is not the zero polynomial by primitivity of \( f_0 \). Then the total degree of \( R \) is

\[
L := \sum_{c(\alpha) = 0} \ell(\alpha) \leq \deg c \cdot \deg f
\]

and the coefficient of \( a_L^L \) is \( \prod_{\alpha} \gamma_{\ell(\alpha)}^{(0)}(\alpha) \) which is non-zero. Hence \( R \) is non-zero and of degree \( L \).

Finally, we compute the total degree of the equation (2.14) is the sum of \( D_0 \) and \( \deg R \), which is at most

\[
2(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f_0)) \deg f + \deg c \cdot \deg f \leq 2(n \deg f + \text{Ht}(f)) \deg f
\]
since \( \text{Ht}(f) = \text{Ht}(f_0) + \deg c \). This concludes the proof of Theorem 1.3.

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