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Fault-tolerant quantum computation for local non-Markovian noise

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We derive a threshold result for fault-tolerant quantum computation for local non-Markovian noise models. The role of error amplitude in our analysis is played by the product of the elementary gate time $t_0$ and the spectral width of the interaction Hamiltonian between system and bath. We discuss extensions of our model and the applicability of our analysis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Whether or not quantum computing will become reality will at some point depend on whether we can implement quantum computation fault-tolerantly. This would imply that even though the quantum circuitry and storage are faulty, it is possible by error-correction to perform error-free quantum computation for an unlimited amount of time while incurring an overhead that is polylogarithmic in time and space, see [1–7]. For this “software” solution that uses concatenated coding techniques, an error probability threshold of the order of $10^{-4}$--$10^{-6}$ per qubit per clock-cycle has been given for the simplest error models, meaning that for an error probability below this threshold fault-tolerant quantum computation is possible. These estimates heavily depend on error modeling, the efficiency of the error-correcting circuits, and the codes that are used. Different and potentially better estimates are possible, see, for example [8–10]. Another solution to the fault-tolerance problem proposed by Kitaev is to make the hardware intrinsically fault-tolerant by using topological degrees of freedom such as anyonic excitations as qubits [11].

In Refs. [3,4] the threshold result for fault-tolerance is derived for various error models, including ones with exponentially decaying correlations. However, this general model of exponentially decaying correlations does not make direct contact with a detailed physical model of decoherence. Such a physical model of decoherence starts from a Hamiltonian description involving the environmental degrees of freedom and the computer “system” degrees of freedom.

Starting from such a Hamiltonian picture it was argued in a paper by Alicki et al. [12] that fault-tolerant quantum computation may not be possible when the environment of the quantum computer has a long-time memory.

In this paper we carry out a detailed threshold analysis for some non-Markovian error models. Our findings are not in agreement with the views put forward in the paper by Alicki et al., that is, we can derive a threshold result in the non-Markovian regime if we make certain reasonable assumptions about the spatial structure and interaction amongst the environments of the qubits. The results of our paper and the previous results in the literature are summarized in Sec. IV of this paper. In Sec. I A we introduce our notation and our assumptions on the decoherence model. In Sec. I B we introduce our measure of error or decoherence strength which we motivate with a small example. Then in Sec. I C we prove some simple lemmas that will be used in the fault-tolerance analysis and in Sec. I D we discuss the overall picture of a fault-tolerance derivation, in particular the parts of this derivation that do not depend on the decoherence model. Then in Sec. II we fill in the technical details to obtain the threshold result expressed in Theorem 1. In Sec. III we generalize our decoherence model to incorporate more relaxed conditions on the spatial structure of the bath and we discuss further possible extensions. In Sec. IV we give an overview of all known fault-tolerance results including ours and in Sec. V we discuss several physical systems in which our analysis may be applicable.

A. Notation and explanation of the decoherence model

We use the following operator norm: $\|A\| = \max_{\|\phi\|=1} \|A\phi\|$ where $\|\phi\| = \sqrt{\langle \phi | \phi \rangle}$. The following properties will be used: $\|A + B\| \leq \|A\| + \|B\|$, $\|U\| = 1$ if $U$ is unitary, and $\|AB\| \leq \|A\| \|B\|$. An operator $H$ that acts on system qubit $i$ or qubits $i$ and $j$ (and potentially another quantum system) is denoted as $H[q_i]$ or $H[q_i, q_j]$. An unitary evolution denoted by $U(t) = \exp(-it \mathcal{H})$.

The following assumptions have been shown to be necessary for fault-tolerance and thus we keep these assumptions in our analysis.

(1) It is possible to operate gates on different qubits in parallel.

(2) We have fresh ancilla qubits at our disposal. These ancilla qubits are prepared off-line in the exact computational state $\ket{00 \cdots 0}$ and they can be used in the circuit when necessary. They function as a heat-sink which removes entropy from the computation.

In Fig. 1(a) three types of quantum systems are sketched that differ in function and in the amount of control that we can exert over them. First, there is R, for quantum registers, that we can control and use for our computation. Second, there is A, for ancillas, which are used for error-correction and fault-tolerant gate construction during the computation.
The systems R and A taken together are denoted as S for system of which single qubits are denoted by the letter q. Clean ancilla registers set to \([00\ldots0]\) are added during the computation and can be removed after having interacted with (1) other parts of the system S by error-correcting procedures and (2) the bath B according to some fixed interaction Hamiltonian.

We will assume that the third system, the bath B, which interacts with the system and ancillas has a local structure, illustrated in Fig. 1(b). We will generalize this model in Sec. III. Every qubit \((q_1, q_2, q_3, \ldots)\) of the system has its own bath \((B_1, B_2, B_3, \ldots)\). Only during the time when two qubits interact their baths \((B_1, B_2)\) in the figure) can interact. The idea behind this modeling is that the bath is localized in space, i.e., is associated with the place where the qubit is stored. But when qubits interact, they need to be brought together and so they may share a common bath. In the picture \(B_1 + B_2\) at time \(t + t_0\) are suggested to be the same baths that qubits \(q_1\) and \(q_2\) interacted with at time \(t\), but in general they may also be different baths. For example, when qubits \(q_1\) and \(q_2\) have to be moved in order to interact, they may see a partially new environment at time \(t + t_0\). This distinction will not be important in our analysis.

Most importantly, in this model, each bath can have an arbitrarily long memory; at no point in our derivation will we make a Markovian assumption. This implies that, for example, the bath \(B_1\) may contain information about qubit \(q_1\) at time \(t\), then interact with bath \(B_2\) at time \(t + t_0\) and pass this information on to bath \(B_2\), etc. The interaction Hamiltonian of a single qubit \(q_i\) of the system (R or A) with the bath is given by

\[
H_{SB}[q_i] = \sum_k \sigma_k[q_i] \otimes A_k, \tag{1}
\]

with the Pauli-matrices \(\sigma_k\) acting on qubit \(q_i\) and \(A_k\) is some Hermitian operator on the bath of the qubit \(q_i\) which is not equal to the identity \(I\). During a two qubit gate both qubits may interact with both baths. For simplicity (see [13]) we assume that the interaction is of the form

\[
H_{SB}[q_i, q_j] = H_{SB}[q_i] + H_{SB}[q_j], \tag{2}
\]

where the bath part of each \(H_{SB}[q_i]\) is an operator on the joint bath of qubits \(q_i\) and \(q_j\). We do not care about the time-evolution of the baths except that it has to obey the “local bath assumption,” i.e., noninteracting qubits have noninteracting baths. The system (register and ancilla) evolution \(H_{SA}(t)\) is time-dependent and represents the fault-tolerant quantum circuit that we want to implement. This evolution is built from a sequence of one and two qubit gates and, as was said before, \(t_0\) is the time it takes to perform any such gate.

B. Measure of decoherence strength

Our results will depend on the strength of the coupling Hamiltonian \(H_{SB}[q_i]\). There is an additional freedom in determining \(H_{SB}[q_i]\), namely we can always add a term \(\alpha I_s[q_i] \otimes I_g\) where \(\alpha\) is an arbitrary real constant and \(I\) is the identity operator. This is possible since it merely shifts the spectrum (see [14]). Let \(\mu_i\) be the eigenvalues of \(H_{SB}\). With this freedom we see that

\[
\min\|H_{SB}[q_i] + \alpha I_s[q_i] \otimes I_g\| = (\mu_{\max} - \mu_{\min})/2 = \Delta_{SB}[q_i],
\]

the spectral width of the interaction Hamiltonian (divided by 2). Our analysis will apply to physical systems where one can bound

\[
\forall q_i \in S, \quad \Delta_{SB}[q_i] \leq \lambda_0, \tag{4}
\]

where \(\lambda_0\) is a small constant which will enter the threshold result, Theorem 1, together with \(t_0\), the fundamental gate time. In what follows we will denote \(\Delta_{SB}[q_i]\) as \(\Delta_S\) or \(\Delta\) assuming that the spectral width is the same for each qubit in \(S\).

We justify the use of this norm in the following way. Consider a single qubit coupled to a bath such that both bath and system Hamiltonians are zero but there exists nonzero coupling. To what extent will an arbitrary initial state of qubit and bath change under this interaction? We can consider the minimum fidelity of an initial state \(\psi_S(0)\) with the evolved state at time \(t\):

\[
F_{\min}(t) = \min_{\psi(0)}\|\langle\psi(t)|\psi(0)\rangle\|. \tag{5}
\]

For small times \(t\) such that \(\Delta_{SB}t \leq \pi/2\) the minimum fidelity can be achieved by taking \(|\psi(0)\rangle = 1/\sqrt{2}(|\psi_{\max}\rangle + |\psi_{\min}\rangle)\) where \(|\psi_{\max/min}\rangle\) are the eigenvectors of \(H_{SB}\) with largest and smallest eigenvalues. Then we have

\[
F_{\min}(t) = \cos(\Delta t) = 1 - \Delta^2/2 + O((\Delta t)^4). \tag{6}
\]

Note that this fidelity decay includes the effects on the bath. For this reason this fidelity decay overestimates the effects of decoherence, in other words \(F(\rho_S(t), \rho_S(0)) \geq F_{\min}\).

One may compare this fidelity decay with that of other decoherence processes, for example, the depolarizing chan-
nel $\mathcal{E}$ with depolarizing probability $p$. For such a channel we have $F(\langle \psi \rangle_S, \mathcal{E}(\langle \psi \rangle_S)) = (1-p)/2$ [15]. Thus, loosely speaking, $\Delta t$ could be interpreted as an error amplitude whose square is an error probability.

Thus this brief analysis shows that for some initial states $\psi_{SB}(0)$ the norm of the interaction Hamiltonian measures exactly how the state changes due to the interaction. Since our environment is non-Markovian we cannot exclude such bad initial states, in other words we cannot assume that the decoherence is just due to the interactive evolution of an initially unentangled bath and system.

C. Error modeling tools

The following simple lemma will be used repeatedly in this paper:

**Lemma 1.** Let a unitary transformation $U = U_n \cdots U_1$ where $U_i = G_i + B_i$ and the operator $G_i$ and $B_i$ are not necessarily unitary. Let $U = B + G$ where we define $B$ to be the sum of terms which contains at least $k$ factors $B_i$. Let $\|B\| \leq \epsilon$ and thus $\|G\| \leq 1 + \epsilon$. We have

$$\|B\| \leq \binom{n}{k} \epsilon^k (1 + \epsilon)^{n-k}. \quad (7)$$

If $G_i$ is unitary, we have

$$\|B\| \leq \binom{n}{k} \epsilon^k. \quad (8)$$

**Proof.** We can think about $U$ as a binary tree of depth $n$ such that the children of each node are labeled with $G_i$ or $B_i$ at depth $i$. We prune the tree in the following way: when a branch has $k$ factors $B_i$, we terminate the whole branch with the remaining $U_n \cdots U_m$. The sum of these terminated branches is $B$. $B$ can be bounded by observing that there are $\binom{n}{k}$ terminated branches each of which have norm at most $\|G\|^{n-k}$ (since each branch is a sequence of $G_i$ transformations interspersed with $k$ $B_i$ transformations followed by unitary transformations.

It is easy to prove the following (see also Ref. [16]).

**Lemma 2.** Consider a time-interval $[t, t+t_0)$ and a single qubit $q \in S$ which does not interact with any other qubit in $S$ at that time. The time-evolution for this qubit is given by some unitary evolution $U[q]$ involving its bath $B$. Let $U_0[q] = U_S[q] \otimes U_B$ be the free uncoupled evolution for this qubit. We can write

$$U[q] = U_0[q] + E[q],$$

where $E[q]$ is a fault-operator with norm

$$\|E[q]\| \leq t_0 \|H_{SB}[q]\| = t_0 \lambda_{SB}[q] \leq t_0 \lambda_0. \quad (10)$$

**Proof.** We drop writing the dependence on qubit $q$ for the proof. For the qubit evolution in the interval, using the Trotter expansion we can write

$$U = \lim_{n \to \infty} \prod_{m=1}^n (U_S^{t_m} U_{SB}^{t_m} U_B^{t_m}), \quad (11)$$

where $U_{SB}^{t_m}$ is the time-evolution for $K=S$, $B$ or coupling SB during the time-interval $t_m$ of length $t_0/n$. Now in this expansion we may write $U_{SB}^{t_m} = 1 - iH_{SB} t_0/n + O(t_0^2/n^2)$ and omit these higher order terms. Let us call $G_m = U_S^{t_m} U_B^{t_m}$ and

$$B_m = -i(t_0/n) U_S^{t_m} H_{SB} U_B^{t_m}$$

as in Lemma 1. We thus have $\|B_m\| = t_0 \|H_{SB}\|/n$. Note that $G_m$ is unitary and we have a binary tree of depth $n \to \infty$ and can use Lemma 8 with $k=1$. This gives

$$\|E]\| = \|B\| \leq t_0 \|H_{SB}\|. \quad (12)$$

A similar statement holds when we consider the evolution of two interacting qubits. We have that

$$U_{SB}[q_i, q_j] = U_0[q_i, q_j] + E[q_i, q_j], \quad (13)$$

where $\|E[q_i, q_j]\| \leq 2t_0 \lambda_{SB}[q] \leq 2t_0 \lambda_0$.

D. Overall perspective: Good and bad fault-paths

Since the bath may retain information about the time-evolution and error processes for arbitrary long times we cannot describe the decoherence process by sequences of superoperators on the system qubits. Instead, there is a single superoperator for the entire computation that is obtained by tracing over the bath at the end of the computation. Thus in our analysis we will consider the entire unitary evolution of system, bath, and ancillas. At time $t=0$ bath and ancilla and system are uncoupled and we may always purify the bath, i.e., find a pure state in a larger bath Hilbert space which, when the extra Hilbert space is traced out, yields the desired mixed state. We can then assume a pure initial product state for the combined system and bath, SB. The unitary evolution of the computation consists of a sequence and/or parallel application of the unitary gates $U[q_i, q_j](t+t_0, t)$ and $U[q_i](t+t_0, t)$. Each such gate, say for two qubits, can be written as a sum of an error-free evolution $U_0[q_i, q_j](t+t_0, t)$ and a fault term $E[q_i, q_j]$. Therefore the entire computation can be written as a sum over fault-paths, that is, a sum of sequences of unitary error-free operators interspersed with fault operators. This is very similar as in the fault-tolerance analysis for Markovian error models, where the superoperator during each gate-time $t_0$ can be expanded in an error-free evolution and an erroneous evolution so that the entire superoperator for the circuit is a sum over fault-paths.

The main idea behind the threshold result for fault-tolerance is then as follows, see [4]. There are good fault-paths with so-called sparse numbers of faults which keep being corrected during the computation and which lead to (approximately) correct answers of the computation; and there are bad fault-paths which contain too many faults to be corrected and imply a crash of the quantum computer.

Now the goal of our fault-tolerance derivation which is completely analogous in structure as the one in [4] is to show the following.

(A) Sparse fault-paths lead to sparse errors in the computation. This fact uses the formal distinction between faults that occur during the computation and the effects of these faults, the errors, that arise due to the subsequent evolution which can spread the faults. The fact that sparse fault-paths give rise to sparse errors is due to fundamental properties of fault-tolerant error-correcting circuitry, namely that there ex-
ists error-correcting codes and procedures that do not spread faults too much. It is independent of the choice of decoherence model, and can be applied to any model where one can make an expansion into fault-paths. See Lemma 3.

(B) Sparse errors give good final answers. This is a technical result whose derivation may differ slightly in one or the other decoherence model, but which is intuitively sound for all possible decoherence models. See Lemma 4.

(C) The norm of the operator corresponding to all bad nonsparse fault-paths is “small.” This result depends crucially on the decoherence model that is chosen, in particular the spatial or temporal correlations that are allowed. Second, it depends on the strength of the errors, that is, only for small enough strength below some threshold value will the norm of the bad fault-path operator get small. See Sec. II B.

(A),(B),(C)⇒ When the bad operator norm is small, the answer of the computation is close to what the good fault-path operator yields which is the correct answer according to item B. See Lemma 4 and Theorem 1.

Another small comment about our model is the following: In the usual model for error-correction (see Ref. [6] in [17]), measurements are performed to determine the error-syndrome or the correct preparation of the ancilla states. Since we prefer to view the entire computation as a unitary process, we may replace these measurements by coherent quantum operations. In the error-correction with measurement procedures it is assumed that faults can occur in the measurement itself or in the quantum gate that is performed that depends on this measurement record, but the measurement record by itself is stable since it is classical. If we replace measuring by coherent action for technical reasons in this derivation, it is then fair to assume that the qubit that carries the measurement record is error-free, in other words it does no longer interact with a bath. This modeling basically allows the standard fault-tolerance results in item A expressed in Lemma 3 to carry over in the simplest way to our model.

II. THRESHOLD RESULT

A. Nomenclature

Let the basic error-free quantum circuit denoted by $M_0$ consist of $N$ locations [4]. Each location is given by a triple $([q],G,t)$ where $[q]$ denotes the qubits (one or two at most) involved in some gate $G$ ($G$ could be $I$) at time $t$ in the quantum circuit. In the following, $E[i]$ or $U[i]$ will denote operators that involve location $i$, i.e., if $q_1$ and $q_2$ interact at location $i$ we will write $U[i] = U_0[i]$ instead of enumerating the qubits. For fault-tolerance one constructs a family of circuits $M_r$ by concatenation. That is, we fix a computation code $C$ (see definition 15 in Ref. [4]), for example a CSS code, encoding one qubit into (say) $m$ qubits [18]. We obtain the circuit $M_r$ by replacing each location in the circuit $M_0$ by a block of encoded qubits to which we apply an error-correcting procedure followed by a fault-tolerant implementation of $G$, see Fig. 2. Repeated substitution will give us a circuit $M_r$ at concatenation level $r$.

Essential are the following definitions and a lemma taken from Ref. [4] which define sparseness of a set of locations and error-spread of a code:

FIG. 2. Every single or two-qubit gate $G$ in the circuit $M_{r-1}$ gets replaced by an error-correcting procedure $E$ followed by a fault-tolerant implementation of $G$, $G_{faulttol}$ (possibly involving ancillas).

Definitions from Ref. [4]:

1. A set of qubits in $M_t$ is called an $s$-block if they originate from 1 qubit in $M_{t-r}$. A $s$-working period in $M_t$ is a time interval which originates from one time-step in $M_{t-r}$. An $s$-rectangle in $M_t$ is a set of locations that originate from one location in $M_{t-r}$.

2. Let $B$ be a set of $r$-blocks in the circuit $M_r$. An $(r,1)$-sparse set of qubits $A$ in $B$ is a set of qubits in which for every $r$-block in $B$, there is at most one $(r-1)$-block such that the set $A$ in this block is not $(r-1,1)$-sparse. An $(0,1)$-sparse set of qubits in $M_0$ is an empty set of qubits.

3. A set of locations in a $r$-rectangle is $(r,1)$-sparse when there is at most 1 $(r-1)$-rectangle such that the set is not $(r-1,1)$-sparse in that $(r-1)$-rectangle. A fault-path in $M_r$ is $(r,1)$-sparse if each $r$-rectangle, the set of faulty locations is $(r,1)$-sparse.

4. A computation code $C$ has spread $s$ if one fault which occurs in a particular 1-rectangle affects at most $s$ qubits in each 1-block at the end of that 1-rectangle, i.e., causes at most $s$ errors in each 1-block.

5. Let $A_C$ be the number of locations in a 1-rectangle for a given code $C$.

We state the basic lemma about properties of computation codes which was proved in Ref. [4] (with a correction).

Lemma 3 (A: Lemma 8 in [4] with a correction). Let $C$ be a computation code that can correct 2 errors and has spread $s=1$. Consider a computation $M_t$, subjected to a $(r,1)$-sparse fault-path. At the end of each $r$-working period the set of errors is $(r,1)$-sparse.

Thus for simplicity we will be using a quantum computation code that encodes one qubit and can correct two errors and has spread $s=1$. We denote the entire unitary evolution of $M_t$ including the bath as $Q^t$. We may write $Q^t = Q_{error} + Q_{good}$ where $Q_{good}$ is a sum over good $(r,1)$-sparse fault-path operators and $Q_{error}$ contains the bad nonsparse terms. A fault-path operator $E_{SB}$ that is $(r,1)$-sparse is a sequence of free evolutions $U_0[i]$ for all locations except that in every $r$-rectangle there is a $(r,1)$-sparse set of locations where a fault operator $E[i]$ occurs.

Definition 1 (Operators in the interaction picture). Let $U_0(t_2,t_1) = U_0(t_2,t_1) \otimes U_0(t_2,t_1)$ be the free uncoupled evolution of system and bath in the time-interval $[t_1,t_2]$. We define a fault-operator $E(t_2,t_1)$ in the interaction picture as

$$E(t_2,t_1) = U_0(t_2,t_1)E[U_0(t_2,t_1)] .$$

The interpretation is that $E(t_2,t_1)$ is the spread of a fault $E$ that occurs at $t_1$ due to the subsequent free evolution.
Then it is simple to see the following:

Proposition 1 (Error spread in the interaction picture). Consider a quantum circuit $M$. Let $U_0(t_f, t_1)$ be the uncoupled evolution for $M$. Faults occur at a set of “time-resolved” locations

$$T = \{(i_1, t_1), (i_2, t_2), \ldots, (i_k, t_k)\},$$

where $i_1, \ldots, i_k$ is the set of distinct locations of the faults and $t_1, \ldots, t_k$ label the specific times that the faults occur at the locations. Let $E_{SB}(T)$ be a particular fault-path operator in which at every faulty location $(i, t) \in T$ we replace $U_0[i]$ by a fault-operator $E[i]$. We have

$$E_{SB}(T)U_0(t_f, t_1) = E[i_1]E[i_2] \cdots E[i_k](t_f, t_1). \quad (15)$$

We note that the system part of $E_{SB}U_0$ is $I$ everywhere except for the qubits that are in the causal cone of the faulty locations, i.e., the qubits to which the errors potentially have spread.

Proof. This can be shown by inserting $I = U_0(t_f, t_1)U_0(t_f, t_1)$ in the appropriate places and then using the definition of fault operators in the interaction picture. \qed

Now we include error-correction and differentiation between the ancilla systems $A$ used for error-correction which may contain noise and the registers $R$ in which the errors remain sparse. Note that all these ancillas are in principle discarded after being used, but we may as well leave them around. Let $K_C$ be the restriction of the operator $K$ to vectors in the code-space of $C$, i.e., $K_C = KP_C$ where $P_C$ is the projector on the codespace.

Let us consider a fault-path operator $E_{SB}$ representing a single fault $E$ at time $t$ on some block that is subsequently corrected by an error-free error-correcting procedure. Let $|IN\rangle$ be the initial state of the computer, bath and ancillas and $U_0(t_f, t_1)$ be the perfect evolution. We have

$$E_{SB}|IN\rangle = E_{SB}U_0|\psi_C(t_f)\rangle,$$

where $|\psi_C(t_f)\rangle$ is the final perfect state of the computer, prior to decoding and therefore in the codespace. $E_{SB}$ is the sequence $U_0(t_f, t_1)E(t_f, t_1)$ where $E(t_f, t_1)$ includes the error correction operation. In other words, in the interaction picture, we can write

$$E_{SB}|IN\rangle = E(t_f, t_1)|\psi_C(t_f)\rangle. \quad (17)$$

The error-correcting conditions (see [15], par. 10.3) imply that when acting on the code space and an ancilla state set to $|00\cdots0\rangle$ the operator $E(t_f, t)$ will be $E(t_f, t) = I_C \otimes (J)_{AB}$ where $J$ is any arbitrary operator on the ancilla (that receives the erasure syndrome in the error-correcting procedure) and bath. In Eq. (17) the final error-free state has all ancillas set to $|00\cdots0\rangle$ and the system state is in the code-space and thus the error acts as $I$ on the system.

Similarly, let $E_{SB}$ contain two faults at times $t_1 < t_2$ that have not spread (say) and are then corrected by a perfect error-correcting procedure. We have

$$E_{SB}|IN\rangle = E_2(t_r, t_2)E_1(t_r, t_1)|\psi_C(t_f)\rangle. \quad (18)$$

Let us assume, for example, that $E_1$ occurs prior to error-correction and $E_2$ occurs during error-correction. Then due to the error correction $E_1(t_r, t_1)$ acts as $I$ on the code space when the ancilla used for error-correction is set to $|00\cdots0\rangle$ and acts as $J$ on this ancilla and the bath. The error $E_2$ will not be corrected and may still be present (but will not have spread to more qubits in the block due to the spread properties of the code that is used) after error-correction. Thus in total we can write for this process that $E_1(t_r, t_1)$ acts as $I$ on the code space, whereas $E_2(t_r, t_2)$ is an operator that acts on the code space as at most one error per block.

Alternatively, both faults could occur prior to error-correcting so they can both be corrected by our code. This implies that both $E_1(t_r, t_1)$ and $E_2(t_r, t_2)$ act as $I$ on the code-space. Note that after the first fault the ancilla will be partially filled (i.e., not be $|00\cdots0\rangle$) but since the code can correct two errors there is still space to put the second error syndrome in. However, a third operator $E_3(t_r, t_3)$ would no longer act as $I$ on the code-space since the code cannot correct three errors.

In other words, with these examples we can see how Lemma 3 can be translated in terms of the sparseness of the errors in the interaction picture, i.e., the sparseness of places where they act as nonidentity on the final encoded state of the register qubits. In the next lemma we need to consider the effect of such sparse fault-path operators $E_{SB}$ on the final state of the computer. This is the state of the computer obtained after fault-tolerant decoding which is as follows. The fault-tolerant decoding procedure for a single level of encoding takes a code word $|c\rangle$ and “copies” (by doing CNOT gates) the codeword $m$ times. Then on each “copy” we determine what state it encodes and then we take the majority of the $m$ answers. This procedure is done recursively when more levels of encoding are used.

In the fault-tolerant decoding procedure faults can occur on the code words, i.e., as incoming faults, during the copying procedures and during the determination of what is encoded by the code word. The last procedure will usually be a conversion from a quantum state to a classical bit string since this will be the most efficient. This implies that the step of taking the recursive majority of these bits is basically error-free since it only involves classical data. In the next lemma we model this by coherent quantum operations that output superpositions of decoded bit strings followed by an error-free measurement that takes the recursive majority of these bits.

**Lemma 4 (B: Sparse faults give almost correct answers).** Let $Q' = Q'_c + Q'_b$ be the unitary evolution of $M$, and let $\|Q'_b\| \leq 1/2$. Let $\nu_0(i)$ be the output probability distribution under measurement of some set of qubits of the error-free original computation $M_0$. Let $\nu(i)$ be the simulated output distribution of the encoded computation $M_e$ with evolution $Q'$. We have

$$\|\nu_0 - \nu\| \leq \sqrt{2\epsilon} + 16\epsilon. \quad (19)$$

Proof. The initial state of the computer is $|IN\rangle_{RA} = |00\cdots0\rangle_{RA} \otimes |IN\rangle_R$ for some arbitrary state $|IN\rangle_R$. Let $U_0'$ be the error-free evolution of $M_e$ including the final decoding operation. Thus let $U_0'[IN]_{RA} = |OUT_{0R}| \otimes |REST\rangle_{AB}$. Let $Q'|IN\rangle_{RA} = |OUT_{RA}\rangle$ and $Q'_b|IN\rangle_{RA} = |OUT_{BG}\rangle_{RA} - |OUT_{BG}\rangle_{RA}$. We
will drop the label $\text{RAB}$ from now on. The norm of $|\text{OUT}_G\rangle$ will be denoted as $||\text{OUT}_G||$. We have
\begin{equation}
1 = ||Q'|\langle\text{IN}|| \leq ||Q'_G\langle\text{IN}|| + ||Q'_B\langle\text{IN}||,
\end{equation}
so that $||\text{OUT}_G|| \geq 1 - ||Q'_G\langle\text{IN}|| \geq 1 - \epsilon$. On the other hand $||Q'_G|| = ||Q'_G - Q'_B|| \leq 1 + \epsilon$.

Let $G$ be the set of $(r,1)$-sparse fault-paths. We have $Q'_G = \Sigma_{T \in G} E_{SB}(T)$ where $E_{SB}(T)$ is the fault-path operator of a $(r,1)$-sparse fault-path labeled by location and time index set $T$. We can write
\begin{equation}
|\text{OUT}_G\rangle = \sum_{T \in G} E_{SB}(T)U_0^T |\text{OUT}_0\rangle \otimes |\text{REST}_{\text{AB}}\rangle.
\end{equation}
By the arguments above and the fundamental Lemma 3 we know that $E_{SB}(T)U_0^T$ is I everywhere except on a $(r,1)$-sparse set of qubits. Let $w$ be the number of output qubits of $M_0$. The ideal state $|\text{OUT}_0\rangle$ has the property that all qubits in an $r$-block have the same value in the computational basis, i.e.,
\begin{equation}
|\text{OUT}_0\rangle = \sum_{i_1, \ldots, i_w} a_{i_1, \ldots, i_w} |i_1\rangle^{\otimes m'} \cdots |i_w\rangle^{\otimes m'},
\end{equation}
where $m$ is the number of qubits in a 1-block. The final step of the computation is a measurement of all output qubits that takes the recursive majority on the block to get the final output string $i$ of length $w$ with probability $P_{\text{fl}}^i(i)$. We model the measurement using POVM elements $E_k = \Sigma_i E_i$. Since not all of these $w$ output bits may be relevant output bits of $M_0$, we may use the fact that distance-trace is nonincreasing over tracing [15] so that
\begin{equation}
||P_0 - P||_1 \leq ||P^0 - P^{\text{fl}}||_1
\end{equation}
where $P^{\text{fl}}(k) = \text{Tr} E_k|\text{OUT}\rangle\langle\text{OUT}|_{\text{RAB}}$ and $P^0 = \text{Tr} E_k|\text{OUT}_0\rangle\langle\text{OUT}_0|_{\text{R}}$. Let us also define $P^{\text{fl}}_G$ the distribution of outcomes if the state of the computer would be the normalized state $|\text{OUT}_G\rangle = |\text{OUT}_G\rangle/||\text{OUT}_G||$. The triangle inequality and the properties of the trace-norm imply that
\begin{equation}
||P^0 - P^G||_1 \leq ||P^0 - P^{\text{fl}}_G||_1 + ||P^{\text{fl}}_G - P_G||_1
\leq |||\text{OUT}|| - |\text{OUT}^G||/||\text{OUT}^G||_1 + ||P^G - P^0||_1.
\end{equation}
Here the first term can be bounded, using the relation of the trace norm to the fidelity $F(\psi, \phi) = ||\langle\psi|\phi\rangle||^{\text{15}}$, as
\begin{equation}
|||\text{OUT}|| - |\text{OUT}^G||/||\text{OUT}^G||_1
\leq \sqrt{1 - F(\text{OUT}, \text{OUT}^G)}^2/2G^2
\leq \sqrt{1 - ||\text{OUT}^G||^2} \leq \sqrt{2\epsilon - \epsilon^2}.
\end{equation}
Now consider the second trace norm on the right-hand side of Eq. (24). We note that all states that are linear combinations of $(r,1)$-sparse error sets applied to the state $|k\rangle^{\otimes m'}|k_w\rangle^{\otimes m'}$ will give rise to the measurement outcome $k$ since we are taking majorities. We can model $E_k = P_k$ where $P_k$ is the projector onto the space of computational basis states that give rise to the majority output string $k$. Thus we have
\begin{equation}
P_k^G = \alpha_{k_1, \ldots, k_n} \sum_{T \in G} E_{SB}(T)U_0^T |k_1\rangle^{\otimes m'} \cdots |k_n\rangle^{\otimes m'}
\end{equation}
\begin{equation}
\otimes |\text{REST}_{\text{AB}}\rangle,
\end{equation}
which can be written as $\alpha_{k_1, \ldots, k_n} |Q'_G(\psi_k)\rangle$ for some normalized state $|\psi_k\rangle_{\text{RAB}}$. This implies that the second term in Eq. (24) can be bounded as
\begin{equation}
||P^G - P^0||_1 \leq \sum_k |\alpha_{k_1, \ldots, k_n}|^2 \left( \frac{||Q'_G(\psi_k)||_2^2}{||\text{OUT}^G||} - 1 \right)
\leq \sum_k |\alpha_{k_1, \ldots, k_n}|^2 \max_k \frac{||Q'_G(\psi_k)||_2^2}{||\text{OUT}^G||^2} - 1 \leq \frac{4\epsilon}{(1 - \epsilon)^2},
\end{equation}
using the bounding inequalities of $||Q'_G||$ and $||\text{OUT}_G||$. All bounds put together, using $\epsilon < 1/2$, give the result, Eq. (4).}

\section{B. Step C: Nonsparse fault-paths have small norm}
Consider the evolution $\mathcal{Q}'$ which can be viewed as a sequence of unitary evolutions, one for each $r$-rectangle, since qubits in different rectangles do not interact. The number of locations in $M_0$ is $N$. The computation $\mathcal{Q}'$ is bad when at least one $r$-rectangle is bad, or using Lemma 1
\begin{equation}
||\mathcal{Q}'|| \leq N ||R^e_G|| ||R^c_G||^{N-1},
\end{equation}
where $R^e_G$ and $R^c_G$ are the good and bad parts of the unitary evolution $R'$ for some $r$-rectangle. The unitarity of $R'$ implies that we can bound $||R^e_G|| \leq 1 + ||R^c_G||$. In each rectangle we can view the entire evolution as a sequence of unitary evolutions, one for each $(r-1)$-rectangle. Note that we are again using the fact that noninteracting qubits have noninteracting baths. An $r$-rectangle is bad when there are at least two $(r-1)$-rectangles which contain sets of faulty locations which are not $(r-1,1)$ sparse. This implies, using Lemma 1 again, that
\begin{equation}
|||R^e_G|| = \frac{A_c}{2} ||R^e_G||^{A_c-1}.
\end{equation}
where we can use that $||R^c_G|| \leq 1 + ||R^c_G||^{A_c-1}$. When $r=1$, $R^1_G$ is a unitary operation and thus $||R^1_G||=1$. This recurrence in $r$ is identical to the one in Lemma 11 in Ref. [4] and thus the solution and results are the same if we replace $\eta$ in Ref. [4] by $\lambda_{t_0}$. Thus the critical error threshold value is
\begin{equation}
\lambda_{t_0} = \frac{1}{eA_c(A_c - 1)}.
\end{equation}
Here we can observe a difference with the simplest error model with error probability $p$ for which the critical value is $p_c = 1/\left(\frac{A_c}{2}\right)$ [4]. The dimensionless quantity $\lambda_{t_0}$ plays the role of an amplitude, see Sec. V, which implies that this threshold value may be more stringent than in the simple probabilistic error model (see also the critique by Alicki [19] on our results). However, we believe that this analysis is too coarse to really give information about the value of the threshold. The fact is that in practice, baths do not have infinite memory
times since they are coupled to many other degrees of freedom. Representing the coupling between bath and system as a pure coherent evolution was needed in this analysis to deal with the non-Markovian dynamics; however, we do not expect this formal procedure to give rise to an optimal error threshold.

The idea of the remaining derivation given in Ref. [4] is to show that when $\lambda_{d_0} < (\lambda_{d_0})_c$, for large enough concatenation level $r$, $\|Q'_\delta\| \leq \epsilon$ for arbitrary small $\epsilon$. Lemma 4 then tells how much our quantum computation errs from the error-free computation. Summarizing we get the following, as in Ref. [4].

**Theorem 1** (Threshold theorem for local non-Markovian noise). Let $N$ be the number of locations of an error-free quantum computation $M$ that outputs samples from a probability distribution $P$. There exists a quantum circuit $M'$ subjected to noise according to the Hamiltonian $H_{SB}$ and bath Hamiltonian $H_B$ that obeys the “noninteracting qubits have noninteracting baths” assumption which outputs the probability distribution $P'$ such that

$$\|P' - P\|_1 \leq \epsilon,$$  \hspace{1cm} (31)

when $\Delta_{SB} < 1/[\epsilon A_C(A_C - 1)]$ and $A_C$ is the number of locations in a 1-rectangle of a (computation) code $C$ that can correct two errors and has spread $s = 1$. The number of locations in $M'$ is $N \text{polylog} N/\sqrt{\epsilon}$.

**Proof.** This follows from the basic results in Ref. [4] and Lemma 4 and step C above. It was proved in Ref. [4] for $\lambda_{d_0}$ below the threshold ($\lambda_{d_0}$), in Eq. (30) when the concatenation level $r = c_1 \log^2 \log(N/\epsilon') + c_2$ for constants $c_1$, $c_2$, and $c_3$ we have $\|Q'_\delta\| \leq \epsilon'$. So we choose $M' = M_r$, the computation at this concatenation level $r$ which implies that $\|P' - P\|_1 \leq \sqrt{2} \epsilon' + 16 \epsilon' = \epsilon$. The number of resources (time and space, related to $A_C$) in $M'$ scales exponentially, i.e., the number of locations in $M_r$ is $N A_C$. With the dependence of $r$ on $N$ and $\epsilon'$ this implies the polylogarithmic overhead in terms of $N$ and $\sqrt{\epsilon}$.

### III. Extension to Decoherence Models with Clustered Qubits

In the most general noise model we start with a Hamiltonian description of system and bath. We will assume that such Hamiltonians are 1-system local, that is, the interaction Hamiltonian between system and bath is a sum of terms each of which couples a single qubit to some part of the bath. This covers many interaction Hamiltonians in systems that are being considered for quantum computation (see [20]).

We have seen that basically the only place where the noise model enters the derivation of fault-tolerance is in Sec. II B, i.e., the derivation that the total amplitude/probability/norm for nonparsc fault-paths at concatenation level $r$ goes (doubly exponentially fast in $r$) to zero when the initial error strength is below the threshold. Locality of the interaction Hamiltonian is an important (and necessary) ingredient in the derivation of fault-tolerance since it implies—with any further assumptions on the structure of the bath or the (non-)Markovian character of the system—that fault-path operators with $k$ faults have a norm bounded by $(2\lambda_{d_0})^k$ (see the Appendix). This bound is not strong enough by itself to derive that $\|Q'_\delta\|$ becomes arbitrarily small for sufficiently small $\lambda_{d_0}$. We find that there are technical and potentially fundamental problems in the derivation of step C, for the most general local Hamiltonian model both in the Markovian case as well as in the non-Markovian case. The problems are due to the fact that all qubits of the computer potentially couple at a given time to the same bath which was prevented in the derivation of Theorem 1 by assuming that “noninteracting qubits have noninteracting baths.” The problem is basically due to the fact that the unitary evolution of a working period cannot be written as a product of unitary evolutions for each rectangle in the working period since different rectangles may share their bath.

We thus need to consider restricted models that are still physically very relevant:

**Clustered qubits at encoding level $r=1$**

We can generalize the model in Sec. I A, i.e., noninteracting qubits have noninteracting baths, to one in which a cluster of qubits can share a bath. The model is depicted in Fig. 3. We will assume that qubits that are contained in a 1-rectangle of $M_r$ may share a common bath whereas qubits in different 1-rectangles do not share a bath. We imagine that baths are attached to physical locations, so that the interaction regions of different $r$-rectangles are physically separate. This means that from one 1-working period to the next one, qubits have to be moved around, i.e., qubits that participate in one 1-rectangle have to be brought together.

Let us for the moment neglect the machinery that is necessary to move qubits around. Then we can observe that the entire computation $M_r$ can be viewed as a sequence of unitary gates each involving a single 1-rectangle. In the 1-rectangle we cannot decompose the evolution as a sequence of unitary transformations for each location; but at this lowest level $r=1$ it is simple to derive a bound on the **bad part** $R^1_B$ of the unitary operation $R^1$. Given this bound we can insert it in the previous recurrence of Eq. (29) and determine a threshold which is the same as before. Here is the bound on $R^1_B$.

**Lemma 5.** Let $R^1 = R^1_B + R^1_G$ be the unitary transformation of a 1-rectangle where $R^1_B$ is a sum of nonparsc fault-path operators, i.e., each such operator contains at least two locations with faults. Then

$$\|R^1_B\| \leq 2(A_C t_0 \lambda_0)^2$$

and $\|R^1_G\| \leq 1 + \|R^1_B\|$.

**Proof.** We do a Trotter expansion for $R^1$ as in Lemma 6 and obtain a tree with infinite depth. We combine branches of the tree in the following way: (1) After a location has become faulty we append the full unitary for the remaining time of the location and (2) if two faults have occurred at two different locations we do no longer branch the tree and just append the entire remaining unitary transformation to that branch. In this way the norm of every time-resolved branch with at least two faults $E_{\sigma_{TB}}(T)$ is bounded by $\|E_{\sigma_{TB}}(T)\| \leq (2\lambda_{d_0}/n)^2$. There are $\binom{A_C t_0}{2}$ such branches and thus
A physical example of this decoherence model is the proposal for scalable ion-trap computation \cite{21}. A few qubits are stored in an ion-trap where they may share a common bath. The states of qubits can be moved around to let them interact. A small cluster of ion-traps may be used to carry out the fault-tolerant circuits and error-correcting at level \( r = 1 \) of encoding.

The issue of moving qubit states around is not entirely trivial and will be addressed in detail in a future paper \cite{22}.

IV. OVERVIEW

We would like to summarize the known results, including the ones in this paper, on threshold results for different decoherence models. The simplest model is one in which we assume that each location undergoes an error with probability \( p \) and undergoes no error with probability \( 1 - p \). This is a specific example of a Markovian model in which every location has its own separate environment, i.e., we have “Single location baths,” see the upper left entry in Table I. Generalizations of this model exist \cite{3,4}; in these models a superoperator \( S(\rho) = S_0(\rho) + \mathcal{E}(\rho) \) where \( S_0 \) corresponds to the error-free evolution and \( \mathcal{E} \) to the erroneous part, is associated with each location. Again this corresponds to the upper left entry in the table. This model has been generalized to allow for more general correlations in space and time in the following manner. In Ref. [4] fault-tolerance was derived in a model where it is assumed that the probability for a fault-path with \( k \) faults is bounded by \( C p^k (1-p)^{3-k} \) where \( N \) is the

\[
\| R_{\text{eff}}^1 \| \leq (2 \lambda_0 d / n)^2 \left( \frac{A_c t_0 / t}{2} \right) \leq 2 (A_c t_0 \lambda_0)^2. \tag{33}
\]

A physical example of this decoherence model is the proposal for scalable ion-trap computation \cite{21}. A few qubits are stored in an ion-trap where they may share a common bath. The states of qubits can be moved around to let them interact. A small cluster of ion-traps may be used to carry out the fault-tolerant circuits and error-correcting at level \( r = 1 \) of encoding.

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| Spatial correlations | Single location baths | Cluster location baths at \( r = 1 \) | Arbitrary baths |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Temporal correlations| Markovian within gate-time \( t_0 \) | \( \checkmark \) | \( \checkmark \) | \( ? \) |
|                      | Non-Markovian with finite memory time \( \tau > t_0 \) | \( \checkmark \) | \( \checkmark \) | \( ? \) |
|                      | Non-Markovian with unlimited memory time | \( \checkmark \) | \( \checkmark \) | \( ? \) |
Some progress can be made in finding good bounds for \(|H_{SB}|\) in the case of a bosonic environment if additional assumptions about its state can be made. What is troublesome about the potential nonequilibrium state of the bath is that expectation values such as \(\text{Tr} a_i a_i^\dagger \phi(\psi_{SB})\) and \(\text{Tr} a_i^2 \phi(\psi_{SB})\) may not be zero since the bath state may not be diagonal in the energy or boson number basis. On the other hand, interaction with other environments, for example, by means of cooling, will dephase the state of the bath (due to energy
exchange) and drive it to a state that is diagonal in the energy eigenbasis. Under that assumption only the terms $\text{Tr} a_i^\dagger a_i \langle \psi | H_{SB} | \psi \rangle$ and $\text{Tr} a_i^\dagger a_i \langle \psi \rangle$ are nonzero. In that scenario, Eq. (37) simplifies to

$$\|H_{SB}|\psi\rangle_{SB}\| \approx \sqrt{\sum_i |c_i|^2 \langle \psi | a_i^\dagger a_i + 1/2 | \psi \rangle_{SB}}.$$  

(39)

Still, $\|H_{SB}|\psi\rangle_{SB}\|$ can be very large if some modes of the environment are highly excited, $n_i a_i^\dagger a_i \gg 1$. However, in a realistic setting, this will be prevented by cooling the bath, i.e., by constantly removing energy from it. Without making a Markov approximation, we can thus assume that the occupation numbers $n_i$ of the bath are upperbounded by those of a thermal distribution with an effective maximal temperature $T_{\text{eff}}$. This gives

$$\|H_{SB}|\psi\rangle_{SB}\| \leq \sqrt{\int_0^\infty J(\omega) \coth(\beta_{\text{eff}}(\omega/2))/2},$$  

(40)

where $\beta_{\text{eff}}=1/k_B T_{\text{eff}}$. We can evaluate Eq. (40) for the ohmic case using MATHEMATICA

$$\|H_{SB}|\psi\rangle_{SB}\| \approx \sqrt{\frac{\alpha}{2}} \sqrt{1 - \frac{2\Psi'(\frac{1}{2})}{\beta_{\text{eff}} \omega_c} \frac{1}{\beta_{\text{eff}} \omega_c}},$$  

(41)

where $\Psi'(x)$ is the first derivative of the digamma function $\Psi(x) = \Gamma'(x)/\Gamma(x)$ where $\Gamma(x)$ is the gamma function. For $1/\beta_{\text{eff}} \omega_c \ll 1$ we do a series expansion and obtain

$$\|H_{SB}|\psi\rangle_{SB}\| \approx \sqrt{\frac{\alpha}{2}} \sqrt{\omega_c^2 + \frac{\pi^2}{3} + O\left(\frac{1}{\beta_{\text{eff}} \omega_c}\right)}.$$  

(42)

Unlike Eq. (38), this bound does not involve extensive quantities, such as the total energy $\langle H_{SB}\rangle_{SB}$ of the bath. However, Eq. (42) still involves the high-frequency cutoff $\omega_c$ because of the zero-point fluctuations of the bath.

**VI. CONCLUSION**

Some important open questions remain in the area of fault-tolerant quantum computation. Most importantly, is there a threshold result for non-Markovian error models with system-local Hamiltonians and no further assumptions on the bath? Is this a technical problem, i.e., how can one efficiently estimate $Q_{\text{fr}}$, or are there specific malicious system-bath Hamiltonians that have such effect that the norm of the bad faults does not become smaller when increasing $r$? The next question is whether a better analysis is possible for the spin-boson model, which is a highly relevant decoherence model. One would like to evaluate the effect of $H_{SB}$ in the sector of physical states, but the characterization of these physical states is unclear due to the non-Markovian dynamics. For real systems one is probably interested in a finite memory time $T > T_0$ which may be simpler to solve. For example, one can derive the superoperator for a single spin qubit coupled to a bosonic bath in the Born approximation [26], however, a derivation involving more than one system qubit may be too hard to do analytically.

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**APPENDIX: BOUNDS ON FAULT-PATH NORMS**

**Lemma 6. (fault-path norms).** Consider the entire unitary evolution $Q'$ of a quantum computation on SB. Let $\forall q \in S. \Delta_{SB}[q] \leq \lambda_0$. We expand $Q'$ as a sum over fault-paths which are characterized by a set of faulty locations $I$. A fault-path operator with $k$ faults has norm bounded by

$$\|E(I_k)\| \leq (2\lambda_0 T_0)^k.$$  

(A1)

**Proof.** We do a Trotter-expansion of $Q'$ and obtain a tree with an infinite number of branches each of which corresponds to a certain time-resolved fault-path. Every time a fault occurs at some time $t_m$ and location $i_m$ we append unitary evolutions for the remaining time of the location, since we do not care that more faults occur in that time-interval, the location has failed anyway. These time-resolved fault-paths are characterized by an index set $I=\{i_1, t_1, i_2, t_2, \ldots, i_k, t_k\}$ where $i_1, \ldots, i_k$ is the set of locations of the faults and $t_1, \ldots, t_k$ label the specific times that the faults occur at the locations. Every such time-resolved fault-operator with $k$ faults has norm bounded by

$$\|E(I_k)\| \leq \left(\frac{2\lambda_0}{n}\right)^k.$$  

(A2)

Now we need to group these time-resolved fault-paths corresponding to faults at sets of locations. For fixed $n$ faults can occur in time-intervals of length $t/n$ and thus during a time $t_0$ $(t_0 n/t)$ time-resolved faults can occur. This implies that

$$\|E(I_k)\| \leq \sum_{I_k^{-}\text{sets}} \|E(I_k)\| \leq (2\lambda_0 T_0)^k.$$  

(A3)
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