Efficient programs of NPC problems should be length upper-bounded, and a thought experiment to search for them by machine enumeration

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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes a thought experiment to search for efficient bounded algorithms of NPC problems by machine enumeration. The key contributions are:

- On Universal Turing Machines, a program’s time complexity should be characterized as: execution time(n) = loading time(n) + running time(n).
- Introduces the concept of bounded algorithms; proposes a comparison based criterion to decide if a bounded algorithm is inefficient; and establishes the length upper bound of efficient bounded programs.
- Introduces the growth rate characteristic function to evaluate program complexity, which is more easily machine checkable based on observations.
- Raises the theoretical question: if there exists any bounded algorithm with polynomial execution time for NPC problems.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
C.1.3 [COMPUTATION BY ABSTRACT DEVICES]: Complexity Measures and Classes

General Terms
Algorithms, Experimentation, Measurement, Theory

Keywords
P ≠ NP, program complexity, UTM

1. MOTIVATION
It has been for decades since the P ≠ NP question was introduced by [2], but people still have not found a polynomial algorithm to any of the NPC problems. This leads many researchers to doubt if such algorithms exist at all. One way to either confirm or dismiss the doubt is to exhaustively search for such algorithms. But this is impossible because in theory there are infinite number of programs, since usually we do not limit a program’s length.

However, let us consider a NPC problem with a particular input size n. Suppose one of its solution program’s length is in the order of exponential of n, in practice on a general-purpose computer (UTM), we will not consider such program efficient, since its loading time alone will take exponential time, regardless of the program’s running time complexity. And for a specialized computer (TM), exponential length means the machine is too expensive to build, either from physical material, or virtual ones such as digital bits. This means there should a upper bound of the length of the program (with respect to the input size) that we will consider efficient. Given such program length upper bound, then the total number of programs is finite, so we can enumerate them, and check if there exists an efficient program for a NPC problem. This is the main intuition that motivated this paper.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we discuss program complexity on Universal Turing Machines; in 2.1, we introduce the concept of bounded algorithms; in 2.2, we propose a comparison based criterion to decide if a bounded algorithm is inefficient; and in 2.3, we establish the length upper bound of efficient bounded algorithms. In section 3, we introduce a new way to evaluate program complexity, which is more easily machine checkable based on observations. In section 4, we propose a thought experiment to search for efficient bounded algorithms of NPC problems by machine enumeration. In section 5, we raise the question whether there exists bounded algorithm with polynomial execution time for NPC problems, and discuss some possible implementation issues with the thought experiment.

In this paper, when we talk about time complexity, it always means worst time complexity; and we sometimes use the term “algorithm” and “program” that implements the algorithm interchangeably.

2. PROGRAM COMPLEXITY ON UNIVERSAL TURING MACHINES
Traditionally in theoretic computer science literature, an algorithm’s time complexity quantifies the algorithm’s running time. It does not care about the algorithm’s loading time. The reason is that when discussing time complexity, the computation model used is Turing Machine (TM, either deterministic or non-deterministic), which computes a fixed partial computable function (the algorithm). The machine

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description is pre-built, therefore there is no loading time, or we treat it always as 0.

However, most of the computers people use today are the general-purpose computers. They are modeled on Universal Turing Machines (UTM), which first reads (loads) an arbitrary stored-program, i.e. the description of a TM (algorithm), and then simulates it on arbitrary input. Therefore:

**Axiom** On a UTM, for input size \( n \), let the program’s total execution time be \( E(n) \), loading time be \( L(n) \), and running time be \( R(n) \), then

\[
E(n) = L(n) + R(n)
\]

**Theorem** On UTM, if there exists an algorithm that solves a NPC problem in polynomial execution time, then both its loading time and running time should be polynomial.

From now on, when we discuss a program’s execution time complexity on a UTM, we also need to investigate the program’s loading time. It is natural to assume that, for theoretical UTMs (and practical general-purpose computers):

**Axiom** A program’s loading time is linear to the program’s length.

In computer science textbook, most algorithm’s length is constant, and can handle all input size \([0, +\infty)\). As the input size \( n \) increases big enough, the running time \( R(n) \) (normally a monotonically increasing function) will dominate the equation, so \( L(n) \) can be ignored.

However on real world computers, programs can only deal with problems with input of finite size, because of either space (memory or disk) or time constraints. When the \( n \) is not big enough, or when an algorithm’s length bears some relationship with the input size \( n \), then \( L(n) \) cannot be ignored.

As an example, in the following we will construct a program called PRECOMPUTE: it is a polynomial running time algorithm for the 3-coloring problem of undirected \( n \)-nodes graphs (a NPC problem) with input size \([0, n]\) for some fixed \( n \), but its loading time is exponential to \( n \). First we define program SIMPLE which will be used later to construct PRECOMPUTE.

**Example: SIMPLE** Generate all the possible combinations of nodes 3-coloring schemes, then try them one by one to see if there is any conflicts, i.e. two adjacent nodes have the same color:

```
1 # input: graph as the set of nodes & edges
2 def SIMPLE(g=(nodes, edges)): # input : graph as the set of nodes & edges
3     hashtable = {...(pre-computed static data)...}
4     for c in colorings = generate_all_combinations (nodes, [R,G,B]):
5         if nodes . length > n: # check input size
6             return undefined
7         key = h(g)
8         r = hashtable[key]
9             return r
```

The running time of SIMPLE is exponential (i.e. \( O(3^n) \), where \( n \) is the number of nodes). Now let us construct PRECOMPUTE:

**Example: PRECOMPUTE** Label each graph node with a unique number: \( \{0, 1, \ldots, n - 1\} \), denote the edge between two nodes \( x \) and \( y \) as \( e(x,y) \), where \( x < y \). There are \( |E| = \frac{n \times (n-1)}{2} \) possible edges between any two nodes, and there are \( |G| = 2^{|E|} \) possible graphs with \( n \) nodes (we do not consider graph iso-morphism).

Label each possible edge with a unique prime number, i.e. \( h(e_{(x,y)}) = p_i \) where \( i \in [0, |E|-1] \) and \( p_i \) is the \( i \)-th prime number. Now each of the possible graph \( g \in G \) can be uniquely labeled with a number by taking the products of all its edge labels: \( h(g) = \prod_{e \in G} h(e) \). In computer science terms, the \( h \) we have just defined is the hash function of a graph.

Now let us construct the program PRECOMPUTE: for each of the possible graph \( g \in G \), using SIMPLE to calculate if it can be 3-colored, and record the result as a pair \( (h(g), r) \) into a hashtable, where \( r \) is true or false depending on whether \( g \) can be 3-colored or not. Output the hashtable as the data segment of PRECOMPUTE.

The code segment of PRECOMPUTE is: for input graph \( g \),

```
1 # input: graph as the set of nodes & edges
2 def PRECOMPUTE(g=(nodes, edges)): # input : graph as the set of nodes & edges
3     hashtable = {...(pre-computed static data)...}
4     if nodes . length > n: # check input size
5         return undefined
6     key = h(g)
7     r = hashtable[key]
8     return r
```

Line 7: calculate \( key = h(g) \), which takes at most \( O(|edges(g)|) \), i.e. time linear to the number of input edges

Line 8: look up the result \( (true \ or \ false) \) from the hashtable using \( key \), which takes \( O(1) \) time

So the running time of PRECOMPUTE is clearly polynomial, while its loading time is exponential to \(|E|\).

### 2.1 Bounded algorithm

The program PRECOMPUTE we have just constructed is different from usual programs in that it can only handle input upto a fixed size. Now let us introduce the concept of bounded algorithm.

**Definition: bounded algorithm** given a number \( n \), if an algorithm \( A \) returns correct result for any input of size \( \leq n \) and returns either correct result or undefined for input size \( > n \), then we say \( A \) is an \( n \)-bounded algorithm; if algorithm \( A \) always (theoretically) returns correct result for all input size \([0, +\infty)\), then we say algorithm \( A \) is unbounded.

The set of unbounded algorithms is clearly a proper subset of the set of bounded algorithms. In the real world computers can only work on problems of finite size, bounded algorithms will actually give programmers more design and implementation choices.

Most algorithms in computer science literature are unbounded, e.g. Euclid’s GCD algorithm, and any sorting algorithms; and their length are constant (with respect to the input size \( n \)). So even on UTM, an unbounded algorithm’s loading time can be ignored as \( n \) becomes significantly large enough:

\[
E(n) = R(n)
\]

For bounded algorithm, the algorithm’s length can be related to the input size, thus play an important role in the execution time complexity, just as we have shown in PRECOMPUTE.
Example: Search Engine It is also tempting to load a program once, and run it multiple times, so the execution time equation becomes:

\[ E(n) = L(n) + m \times R(n) \]

And when \( m \to \infty \), \( L(n) \) can be ignored. E.g. in such case, the PRECOMPUTE we just constructed becomes a search engine for the graph 3-coloring problem, whose running time (query response time) as appeared to the user is polynomial.

Since we have constructed an algorithm PRECOMPUTE with this property, we will not discuss such use case any more. In the remaining of this paper, we will only consider bounded algorithms with \( m = 1 \).

2.2 A comparison based criterion to decide if a bounded algorithm is inefficient

In the program PRECOMPUTE, by the way it is constructed, we know that its length is exponential to the input size \( L(n) = O(2^{|E|}) \), so we can decide it is inefficient. Now suppose we do not know how this program is constructed (e.g. imaging it is from an oracle), and we lack necessary tools to analyze the relationship between its length and the input size. Then, what criterion should we use to decide that this program is inefficient for input size \( n \)?

In the following, we introduce a comparison based criterion:

Definition: UTM-inefficient For a particular problem with input size \( n \), on a fixed UTM, let \( \text{known}_\text{inefficients} \) be the finite set of all the bounded programs that human know so far (by some other means, e.g. source code analysis) are inefficient. Let \( \text{wet}(\text{prog}(n)) \) be the worst execution time of program \( \text{prog} \) with input size \( n \), and we denote the minimum of the worst-case execution time of all those programs in \( \text{known}_\text{inefficients} \) as \( \text{minwet}(n) \), i.e.

\[
\text{minwet}(\text{known}_\text{inefficients}, n) = \min_{\text{known}_\text{inefficients}} \text{wet}(\text{prog}(n))
\]

Let \( A \) be a \( n \)-bounded algorithm, if \( A \)'s execution time is longer than any known inefficient algorithm, i.e. \( E(A, n) \geq \text{minwet}(\text{known}_\text{inefficients}, n) \) then \( A \) is called UTM-inefficient for the given input size \( n \).

For example, initially we can add SIMPLE, and PRECOMPUTE to the knowledge base \( \text{known}_\text{inefficients} \):

• SIMPLE, length complexity \( O(1) \), running time complexity \( O(3^{\text{nodes}}) \).

PRECOMPUTE, length complexity \( O(2^{|E|}) \), running time complexity \( O(|\text{edges}|) \).

Note, as the human knowledge \( \text{known}_\text{inefficients} \) increases, \( \text{minwet}(n) \) will decrease.

2.3 Length upper bound of efficient bounded programs

Corollary If a \( n \)-bounded algorithm’s length \( \geq \text{minwet}(n) \), then it is UTM-inefficient.

Proof. \( E = L + R \), and \( L \geq \text{minwet}(n) \), therefore \( E \geq \text{minwet}(n) \). \( \square \)

Thus \( \text{minwet}(n) \) is an upper bound of the length of efficient bounded programs.

3. A COMPUTABLE PROPERTY OF PROGRAM COMPLEXITY

Let us exam the execution time complexity on UTM again:

\[ E(n) = L(n) + R(n) \]

We have established the length upper bound of efficient bounded programs, before we can start to enumerate programs on a UTM, and search for efficient bounded programs for NPC problems, there is one more issue: it will be better to have a method to evaluate an algorithm’s running time that is machine checkable.

Traditionally, the running time complexity of an algorithm is analyzed by human. We take the algorithm’s description (e.g. source code), and use human knowledge and skills to establish a mathematical model and formulate a limiting function of the program’s running time with respect to its input size. However this step cannot be easily formalized and automated by a computer program. In the this section we will introduce a method to evaluate program complexity that is more machine checkable based on observations.

Definition: growth rate characteristic function let \( f(n) \) be the limiting function of the complexity of an algorithm with input size \( n \) in the big-O notation, i.e. \( T(n) = O(f(n)) \), for \( n > 1 \) we define

\[
g(f(n)) = \log_n f(n)
\]

as the growth rate characteristic function of the algorithm.

Note, it does not matter whether it is time complexity \( T(n) \), space complexity \( S(n) \), or any other kind of program complexities, the following discussion apply to all of them.

Let us consider two important limiting functions in algorithm complexity analysis: polynomial and exponential functions, let \( k > 0 \) be constant:

• For polynomial complexity \( T(n) = O(n^k) \), \( g(f(n)) = k \)

• For exponential complexity \( T(n) = O(2^{n^k}) \), \( g(f(n)) = n^k \log_n 2 \)

3.1 Apply \( g \) on observations

Given a program, we can record its actual running steps corresponding to a series of input size \( \{n_0, n_1, \ldots, n_i\} \) as our observations. We will study \( g \)'s properties on these observations. Let \( ob(n) \) be the actual observed steps for the algorithm performed on input of size \( n \):

• For polynomial complexity \( T(n) = O(n^k) \): by the definition of big-O notation, there exists constant \( M > 0 \), such that \( ob(n) \leq M \times n^k \), where \( n \geq n_0 \) for some constant \( n_0 > 1 \), then

\[
g(ob(n)) = \log_n ob(n) \leq \log_n M \times n^k = \log_n M + \log_n n^k = \log_n M + k
\]

and

\[
\lim_{n \to +\infty} g(ob(n)) \leq \lim_{n \to +\infty} (\log_n M + k) = k
\]

Summary: the upper bound of \( g(ob(n)) \) has limit \( k \); and it is monotonic decreasing with max value \( (\log_n M + \ldots) \).
The following two figures illustrate the upper bound function curves for polynomial and exponential complexity:

\[ g(n) = \log_n ob(n) \]
\[ \leq \log_n M \times 2^{n^k} \]
\[ = \log_n M + \log_n 2^{n^k} \]
\[ = \log_n M + n^k \log_n 2 \]

and

\[ \lim_{n \to +\infty} g(n) \leq \lim_{n \to +\infty} (\log_n M + n^k \log_n 2) \]
\[ = \lim_{n \to +\infty} n^k \log_n 2 \]
\[ = \lim_{n \to +\infty} \frac{n^k \ln 2}{\ln n} \]
\[ = (\text{L'Hôpital's rule}) \]
\[ = \lim_{n \to +\infty} \frac{k n^{k-1} \ln 2}{1/n} \]
\[ = \lim_{n \to +\infty} k n^{k-1} \ln 2 \]
\[ = +\infty \]

Summary: the upper bound of \( g(n) \) has limit +\( \infty \) and it is monotonic increasing after sufficient large \( n \).

Example 1 The following two figures illustrate the upper bound function curves for polynomial and exponential complexity:

Note: what we just discussed is the bounding function’s property of an algorithm, which is different from the actual observations. For example, the \( g \) of actual observations of a polynomial algorithm can be oscillating, but still being bounded, e.g. a program that blankly loops for \( n^{2+\cos(n\pi)} \) steps for input size of \( n \).

3.2 \( g_{ob}^n \) on finite observations

Since we can only make finite observations, any algorithm’s \( g \) will always be bounded by some value. For example both the algorithms in the previous example are bounded by \( g = 5 \) for observations on input of size \([2 \ldots 16]\). Because of the “sufficient large \( n \)” assumption, we are more interested in the ending point metric. Let us introduce a notation \( u(n) \) where \( u(n) \) is the ending observation point and \( u \) is the max value of \( g(n) \) for all \( n \in [2,n_c] \), for simplification we use its ceiling integer value, i.e.

\[ u(n) = \text{ceiling}(\max_{n \in [2,n_c]}(g(n))) \]

So in the previous example, the polynomial is a \( g_{16}^4 \) algorithm, while the exponential is a \( g_{16}^5 \) algorithm.

Algorithm efficiency evaluation method: Given an algorithm \( A \), if for all sufficiently large observation points \( n < m, u(m) \leq u(n) \), then \( A \) is a possible polynomial algorithm.

4. A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT TO SEARCH FOR EFFICIENT \:\( \lambda \)-BOUNDED ALGORITHMS OF NPC PROBLEMS BY MACHINE ENUMERATION

In the previous sections, we have established the length upper bound UB of efficient bounded algorithms on UTM.

Now we can start exhaustive searching for efficient bounded algorithms of NPC problems by machine enumeration. The basic idea is that, for input size \( n \), first generate all the possible programs of length less than \( UB \), and also generate all the program input of size upto \( n \); then for each program, feed all the inputs into it, and run the program \( prog \) for upto \( UB - prog \cdot length \) steps, if it returns all correct answers on those inputs, then add the program to output list.

Finally we output all the correct \( \lambda \)-bounded algorithms (sorted with the smallest \( g_{\lambda}^n \) value of the worst running time at first) for further analysis or human inspection, e.g. using machine aided extrapolation to check if there is any efficient unbounded algorithms.

4.1 Search by enumeration

Let us continue to use the 3-coloring problem. The above description can be formalized by the following algorithm:

```
known_inefficients = {SIMPLE, PRECOMPUTE}
while True:
    UB = minwt(known_inefficients, n)
    outputs = []
    for length in [1, UB]:
        programs = generate_programs_from_strings_with(length)
        for prog in programs:
            results = []
            label: input_loop
            for size in [1, n]:
                prog.worst_running_time[size] = 0
                inputs = generate_all_inputs_with(size)
                for input in inputs:
                    max_steps = UB - prog.length
                    (result, actual_steps) = run(prog, input, max_steps)
                    results.append((result, (size, actual_steps))
                    if not(result.correct):
                        break input_loop
                if actual_steps > prog.worst_running_time[size]:
```
Line 1, seed the set known_inefficients with two known inefficient programs SIMPLE, and PRECOMPUTE.

Line 3, set the initial upper bound UB.

Line 5-7, enumerate all the programs with length up to UB.

Line 8-13, For each of the program prog, feed all the inputs of size [1..n] one by one.

Line 15, for each input, run the program upto (UB - prog.length) steps.

Line 16, record the pair (result, (n, step(n))).

Line 21-22, if all the returned results are correct, then record prog

Line 23-24, output the findings for further analysis, or human inspection.

Line 25-28, if we want to search further, update the program knowledge base known_inefficients, and continue the next search iteration.

4.1 Update program knowledge base

The outputs from the previous step may contain bounded programs that are running time efficient, but loading time inefficient, for example, there may be a program that has the same running time but half the length of PRECOMPUTE, and whose length still holds the exponential relationship with input size n. We need to analyze such programs by human, and if it is found to be inefficient, we add it to the program knowledge base known_inefficients. This will lower the program length upper bound UB = minwet(known_inefficients, n); we will re-run the enumeration process after such knowledge base update. Fortunately, as the total number of outputs is finite, this knowledge base updating process will stop when the knowledge base become saturated.

4.2 Expand search horizon

Also during the search process, there may be programs that have big constant loading time, but polynomial running time for [n0, +∞) for n > n0, which we will skip. However, this is not a real limitation of our approach, as we keep increasing n to expand our search horizon, these programs will be examined again at that time. With the computing resource increases and implementation improves, the searchable n will keep increasing, and we will gain more knowledge about bounded algorithms.

5. DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Does there exist any bounded algorithm with polynomial execution time for NPC problems?

This paper has proposed a thought experiment to search for efficient bounded algorithms of NPC problems by machine enumeration, however the author is more interested in knowing, and hence would like to raise the theoretical question:

Problem 1. Does there exist any bounded algorithm with polynomial execution time for NPC problems?

Although this question is weaker than the original P =? NP question, it has the same importance in practice. After all in this real world we human only have limited resource to build such programs if they exist.

Compare with the original P =? NP question, can we take advantage of the extra program length constraint, and develop some new techniques to find a proof?

5.2 Connections to speedup theorems and algorithmic information theory

In computational complexity theory, the linear speedup theorem for Turing machines states that for any TM solving a problem with t(n) running time, and for any c > 0, we can build an equivalent TM' that can solve the same problem with ct(n) + n + 2 running time. If we take a closer look of the proof of this theorem (e.g. in [4] ch-2.4), and check how the new TM' is constructed, we will see that the running time speed up is achieved at the expense of increased
machine length (i.e. program length). Blum’s speedup theorem [1] works the same way by adding “short-cuts” to the TM’s control table also using the precompute technique. However running time speedup does not always mean increased program length. We can achieve both shorter program length and faster running speed at the same time by using the precompute-and-cache technique, e.g. finding the number of 3-colorable graphs with \( n \) nodes.

In algorithmic information theory, the Kolmogorov complexity [3] of a string (a program in our case) is defined as the length of the shortest program that can generate the string; while this paper tries to connect a program’s length (the information / knowledge formally encoded in it) with its running time efficiency.

5.3 Possible implementation considerations

In practice we have programs with length of many thousands or millions of bytes, it will take prohibitively expensive resource to enumerate them, so the idea proposed in this paper is more a thought experiment. But if we can start work on small input size, and develop techniques to reduce the search space. E.g. if we can decide: there is no efficient bounded program of 3-coloring problem for input size of 4, 5, 6, etc. Then before we can find a solution to the P/NP problem, we will gain some knowledge as the exploration length increases. There are many areas can be developed to speed up and improve the enumeration and evaluation process, for example:

- Choose a Universal Turing Machine and a NPC problem with appropriate properties to reduce the enumeration time or space requirements.

- Develop techniques to reduce the number of programs we need to search. For example let us consider all the possible 64-bit long strings, which correspond to \( 2^{64} \) Turing Machines (i.e. programs), probably most of them do not specify valid programs or will abort when being executed. We can skip generating such invalid program strings from the beginning.

- Develop other machine checkable criterion to decide a generated program’s length and time complexity.

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