

The NFA Acceptance Hypothesis: Non-Combinatorial and Dynamic Lower Bounds

Karl Bringmann ✉

Saarland University, Saarland Informatics Campus, Saarbrücken, Germany
Max Planck Institute for Informatics, Saarland Informatics Campus, Saarbrücken, Germany

Allan Grønlund ✉

Aarhus University, Denmark
Kvantify, Aarhus, Denmark

Marvin Künnemann ✉

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany

Kasper Green Larsen ✉

Aarhus University, Denmark

Abstract

We pose the fine-grained hardness hypothesis that the textbook algorithm for the NFA Acceptance problem is optimal up to subpolynomial factors, even for dense NFAs and fixed alphabets.

We show that this barrier appears in many variations throughout the algorithmic literature by introducing a framework of Colored Walk problems. These yield fine-grained equivalent formulations of the NFA Acceptance problem as problems concerning detection of an s - t -walk with a prescribed color sequence in a given edge- or node-colored graph. For NFA Acceptance on *sparse* NFAs (or equivalently, Colored Walk in sparse graphs), a tight lower bound under the Strong Exponential Time Hypothesis has been rediscovered several times in recent years. We show that our hardness hypothesis, which concerns *dense* NFAs, has several interesting implications:

- It gives a tight lower bound for Context-Free Language Reachability. This proves conditional optimality for the class of 2NPDA-complete problems, explaining the *cubic bottleneck* of inter-procedural program analysis.
- It gives a tight $(n + nm^{1/3})^{1-o(1)}$ lower bound for the Word Break problem on strings of length n and dictionaries of total size m .
- It implies the popular OMv hypothesis. Since the NFA acceptance problem is a static (i.e., non-dynamic) problem, this provides a static reason for the hardness of many dynamic problems.

Thus, a proof of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis would resolve several interesting barriers. Conversely, a refutation of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis may lead the way to attacking the current barriers observed for Context-Free Language Reachability, the Word Break problem and the growing list of dynamic problems proven hard under the OMv hypothesis.

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1 Introduction

Consider a classic problem that lies at the heart of introductory undergraduate courses on the theory of computation: Given a nondeterministic finite automaton (NFA) M and a string x over some alphabet Σ , determine whether x is accepted by M . The textbook algorithm for solving this problem uses dynamic programming and solves the problem in time $O(|M| \cdot |x|)$. Optimality of this algorithm is known for *sparse* NFAs, assuming the Strong Exponential Time Hypothesis and up to subpolynomial factors, as we will discuss in detail in Section 1.2. We put forth the following fine-grained hardness hypothesis, in which we conjecture optimality of this decades-old algorithm also for *dense* NFAs.

► **Hypothesis 1** (NFA Acceptance hypothesis, informal version). *The textbook $O(|M| \cdot |x|)$ time algorithm for NFA Acceptance over any fixed alphabet Σ is optimal up to subpolynomial factors, even if M is a dense NFA.*

In this paper, we shed light on the many guises of the NFA Acceptance problem and highlight the ramifications of the above hardness hypothesis on fine-grained complexity theory in P.

1.1 The many guises of the NFA Acceptance problem

To express equivalent formulations of the NFA Acceptance problem, consider the following problem: Given a directed, simple graph $G = (V, E)$ with edge colors $c : E \rightarrow \Sigma$, distinguished nodes $s, t \in V$ and a color sequence $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \Sigma$, determine whether there is a walk of length ℓ from s to t such that the color sequence of the traversed edges is equal to c_1, \dots, c_ℓ . In a graph with n nodes and $m \geq n$ edges, this problem is easily solved in time $O(m\ell)$, by maintaining a set $S \subseteq V$ of states reachable from s via a walk with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_i , over all $1 \leq i \leq \ell$.

There are natural variants of this problem, by considering *node* colors rather than *edge* colors, *undirected* rather than *directed* graphs, as well as various restrictions on the *size of the alphabet*: We call these problems DIRECTED/UNDIRECTED Σ -EDGE-COLORED/ Σ -NODE-COLORED WALK, see Section 2 for a formal definition. All of these problems can be solved in time $O(m\ell)$. These Colored Walk problems arise in different communities, typically with different generalizations:

- **Formal language theory.** NFA Acceptance is a fundamental problem in formal language theory, as it is the membership problem for regular languages. DIRECTED Σ -EDGE-COLORED WALK is precisely the special case in which the NFA has no loops (transitions from some state q to itself) or multiple transitions between any two states (with different labels from the terminal set).¹ In Section 6, we will show that this special case is fine-grained equivalent to the general case of the NFA Acceptance problem.

¹ Formulating the NFA Acceptance problem as a colored walk problem is not uncommon, see, e.g., [8]. Here we use the Colored Walk problem as a umbrella to express various related problems in a common language.

- **Hidden Markov models.** A Hidden Markov Model (HMM) is a Markov chain in which every state has a distribution over possible observations Σ it emits. In the VITERBI PATH problem, the task is to determine, given a sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ of observations over Σ and a HMM M , the most likely walk through M to emit c_1, \dots, c_ℓ . An extension of the NFA Acceptance algorithm, well-known as Viterbi's algorithm [63], solves this problem in time $O(m\ell)$, where m denotes the size of M . Exploiting the weighted nature of this problem, Viterbi's algorithm has been proven optimal up to subpolynomial factors under the weighted k -Clique hypothesis [11]. Σ -NODE-COLORED WALK is equivalent to the following interesting *unweighted* special case of the problem: in a HMM for which every node v emits a single observation σ_v with probability 1, determine whether there exists *any* walk with positive probability for emitting the observations c_1, \dots, c_ℓ .²
- **Combinatorial Pattern matching, Bioinformatics.** In some applications in combinatorial pattern matching, e.g., in bioinformatics, it is natural to represent a *set* of strings using a node-labeled graph G : Here, every node u is equipped with a string $L_u \in \Sigma^*$ and the represented set of strings is simply the list of all concatenations $L_{u_1} \dots L_{u_k}$ over all walks $u_1 \dots u_k$ in G . A natural question is to perform pattern matching on these graphs, i.e., find an occurrence, or more generally, all occurrences of a given pattern P in some string T occurring in G . A line of work, see, e.g., [47, 7, 50, 35] derives algorithms for exact and approximate matches of a string, see also [27] for references. Σ -Node-Colored Walk is equivalent to detecting an exact occurrence in a graph in which every node is labeled by a single character in Σ .²
- **Database Theory.** An important topic in the area of graph databases are *regular path queries*, see, e.g. [49, 12, 16] and references therein. Here, a database is given as a graph $G = (V, E)$ with edge labels over Σ and the aim is to support queries, which on input a regular expression q , return information about walks in the graph whose labels match the regular expression q (variants of these queries include emptiness, counting, or enumeration of such walks or their endpoints). The emptiness query can be solved in time $O((|V| + |E|)|q|)$ using a straightforward approach of constructing a product graph of G and an NFA representing q ; conditional optimality of this approach has been investigated in [16]. The special case in which q describes a single string of length ℓ is precisely the Σ -EDGE-COLORED WALK problem.²

Interestingly, it turns out that all the special cases discussed above are equivalent in a fine-grained sense. In particular, the NFA Acceptance problem, as well as all $n^{o(1)}$ -Edge-Colored Walk and n -Node-Colored Walk problems are equivalent to the following seemingly simple problem:

DIRECTED 2-EDGE-COLORED WALK

Input: Directed graph $G = (V, E)$, $s, t \in V$, $c : E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, $\ell \in \mathbb{N}$, colors $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, 2\}$

Question: Exist $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with $(v_{i-1}, v_i) \in E$ and $c(v_{i-1}, v_i) = c_i$ for all $1 \leq i \leq \ell$?

For a formal statement of this equivalence and its proof, see Sections 2 and 6.

Thus, the same barrier has been observed across different communities, with extensions of the $O(m\ell)$ -time algorithm in various distinct directions. The only generalization with a tight conditional lower bound for all graph densities is known in the weighted setting of Viterbi's algorithm [11].

² The equivalence of detecting an s - t -walk with a given color sequence and detecting *any* walk with a given color sequence is discussed in Section 6.

A refutation of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis would thus immediately be interesting for a host of communities – as a case in point, several works derive essentially the same conditional lower bounds for sparse graphs and for combinatorial algorithms, see Section 1.2. Furthermore, refuting the hypothesis is a prerequisite to obtaining faster algorithms also for the discussed generalizations, e.g., for *approximating* the VITERBI PATH problem.

1.2 Support for the hypothesis

The current support for the hypothesis is threefold: (I) there are tight conditional lower bounds for *sparse* NFAs based on the Orthogonal Vectors Hypothesis (OVH) and thus the Strong Exponential Time Hypothesis (SETH), (II) there is a tight combinatorial lower bound for all densities of NFAs based on the combinatorial k -Clique hypothesis, and (III) simply the lack of a faster algorithms despite the centrality and age of this problem. We discuss these reasons in detail:

Support I: Hardness for sparse NFAs

It is known that an $O((n\ell)^{1-\epsilon})$ -time algorithm for acceptance of a length- ℓ string by an n -state NFA would refute OVH and SETH. This can be viewed as a tight conditional lower bound for *sparse* NFAs with $m = O(n)$ transitions, but it fails to provide a tight lower bound for NFAs with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ transitions with $1 < \alpha \leq 2$. Several versions of this result have been proven and published in recent years. A subset of the authors have learned the result phrased for NFAs from Russell Impagliazzo in 2015. Since regular expressions of size n can be easily converted to an NFA with $O(n)$ states and transitions, the quadratic conditional lower bounds for regular expression membership/matching in [10, 14] translate to NFA Acceptance lower bounds. Subsequently, the lower bound for sparse NFAs has been derived from the perspective of string matching in labeled graphs [27], of NFA Acceptance [54], and of regular path queries in graph databases [16].³

Interestingly, the same lower bound already holds under a weaker hypothesis, specifically Formula-SETH [3, 56, 29].

Support II: Combinatorial Hardness

Beyond sparse NFAs, the literature provides, perhaps a bit implicitly, a (combinatorial) reduction from k -Clique to NFA Acceptance with a dense NFA with n states with the following implications: (1) an $O((\ell n^2)^{1-\epsilon})$ -time *combinatorial*⁴ NFA Acceptance algorithm for any $\ell = n^\beta$, $\beta > 0$ would give a *combinatorial* $O(n^{(1-\epsilon)k})$ -time k -Clique algorithm for all sufficiently large k , and (2) an $O((\ell n^2)^{\omega/3-\epsilon})$ -time NFA Acceptance algorithm would give a $O(n^{(\omega/3)k-\epsilon'})$ -time k -Clique algorithm for sufficiently large k , breaking the state of the art for current k -Clique algorithms, see [52, 2].

These lower bounds can be obtained either by adapting the reduction from weighted k -Clique in [11] to the unweighted case, or as a special case of [1, Theorem I.5]⁵, or as an appropriate generalization of the reduction from Triangle Detection to NFA Acceptance with $\ell \approx n$ in [54], or as an appropriate generalization of the reduction from Triangle Detection to regular path queries with queries of length $\ell \approx n$ in [16]. For a self-contained reduction see the appendix of the full version of this paper.

³ By the the fine-grained equivalence of the Colored Walk problems of Section 2, these results turn out to be essentially equivalent in their main statement. However, some aspects of the reductions can differ.

⁴ Here, a *combinatorial* algorithm refers to an algorithm that avoids the algebraic techniques underlying fast matrix multiplication algorithms, see Section 1.4 for a discussion.

⁵ In the theorem, simply choose $\alpha_N = \alpha_n = \beta$.

These reductions suggest that to break the NFA Acceptance hypothesis, a non-trivial application of fast matrix multiplication techniques is needed. Put differently, our hypothesis boils down to postulating that *fast matrix multiplication is not applicable for the NFA Acceptance problem*.

Support III: Long-standing State of the Art

Finally, the NFA Acceptance hypothesis is plausible simply due to the lack of any improved algorithms. To the best of our knowledge, the best algorithm for NFA Acceptance for dense NFAs over a constant-sized alphabet Σ runs in time $O(n^2\ell/2^{\Omega(\sqrt{\log n})})$ (see Section 5).

Let us contrast the state of the art for NFA Acceptance, i.e., the membership problem for regular languages, to the membership problem for context-free languages, specifically context-free grammar parsing. The fine-grained complexity of this problem has parallels to NFA Acceptance: The best combinatorial algorithms decide membership of a length- n string in a fixed grammar Γ in mildly subcubic time $O(n^3/\text{polylog } n)$, see [2] for an overview. Any truly subcubic combinatorial algorithm would refute the combinatorial k -Clique algorithm [2]. However, by a highly non-trivial application of fast matrix multiplication, Valiant [58] gave an algorithm for context-free grammar parsing in time $O(n^\omega)$ for constant-sized grammars, but this is known already since 1975! It appears unlikely that a similar algorithm using fast matrix multiplication for NFA Acceptance has been overlooked for decades.

In the appendix of the full version of this paper, we also discuss why natural algorithmic approaches towards refuting the NFA Acceptance hypothesis appear to fail.

It is apparent that the NFA Acceptance hypothesis poses a significant barrier. Finally, we remark that [54] recently posed our NFA Acceptance hypothesis as an open problem.⁶

1.3 Evidence against the hypothesis

The only evidence against the NFA Acceptance hypothesis that we are aware of is the existence of (co-)nondeterministic verifiers with running time $O((n^2\ell)^{1-\epsilon})$. This is even known for the weighted generalization to the Viterbi Path problem [10], but can be proven directly (see the appendix of the full version of this paper) or follows as a consequence of our reduction in Section 3 combined with [20]. This rules out tight *deterministic* reductions from SAT and OV to NFA Acceptance with dense NFAs, assuming a nondeterministic variant of SETH [15]. However, there are several hypotheses with a similar status, in particular, the APSP hypothesis, 3SUM hypothesis and the Hitting Set hypothesis.

1.4 Applications I: Non-combinatorial lower bounds

Our first major consequence of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis are novel tight conditional lower bounds against general algorithms where previously only combinatorial lower bounds were known.

⁶ Potechin and Shallit note, following the SETH-based lower bound for sparse NFAs: “However, this does not rule out an improvement when the NFA is dense, and we leave it as an open problem to either find a significant improvement to this algorithm, or show why such an improvement is unlikely.”

Combinatorial Lower Bounds

Among the oldest conditional lower bounds in the polynomial-time regime are based on Boolean matrix multiplication (BMM), see, e.g. [44] (for a recent survey of fine-grained complexity theory in P, we refer to [61]). The best known algorithm for BMM uses fast matrix multiplication over the integers, yielding an $n^{\omega+o(1)}$ -time algorithm, where ω is the matrix multiplication exponent, with a current state-of-the-art bound of $\omega < 2.37286$ due to works of [57, 23, 60, 43, 6], among others.

Unfortunately, theoretically fast matrix multiplication algorithms generally turn out to be impractical, as the constants hidden in the O -notation are usually too large for the problem sizes observed in applications. Therefore, it has become increasingly popular to use the notion of *combinatorial* algorithms to exclude the use of algebraic techniques underlying current fast matrix multiplications, in an attempt to study algorithms whose asymptotic complexity translates into practical running time. In this direction, it has been hypothesized that BMM does not admit combinatorial $O(n^{3-\epsilon})$ -time algorithms with $\epsilon > 0$. This hypothesis is in fact equivalent to the nonexistence of truly subcubic combinatorial algorithms for triangle detection, and gives tight combinatorial lower bounds for problems such as the Sliding Window Hamming Distance (see [28]), CFL Reachability [18] and many more. A generalization of this hypothesis is that for no $k \geq 3$ and $\epsilon > 0$, k -Clique admits a combinatorial $O(n^{k-\epsilon})$ -time algorithm, which implies a combinatorial version of our NFA Acceptance hypothesis, see the appendix of the full version of this paper.

However, there are several downsides to the notion of *combinatorial* lower bounds: First and foremost, the notion of *combinatorial algorithm* is not formally defined, which is hardly acceptable (see e.g. the discussion in [32]). Second, in theoretical computer science we are usually interested in the optimal asymptotic worst-case complexity, so why would we exclude algorithmic techniques leading to an improved complexity? Third, Strassen’s original algorithm is sometimes found to be practical [34]. Hence, there are several reasons to avoid “combinatorial lower bounds”, as they leave open the very real possibility that faster algorithms exploiting fast matrix multiplication techniques exist.

How can we distinguish between problems for which faster algorithms via fast matrix multiplications exist, and those for which such an improvement is unlikely? Generally speaking, the current state of the art for problems with tight combinatorial lower bounds can be categorized as follows:

1. **(easy)** Problems whose asymptotic complexity is upper bounded by fast matrix multiplication, e.g., context-free grammar recognition for constant-sized grammars [58], maximum node-weighted triangle [24], and others.
2. **(intermediate)** Problems for which improvements via fast matrix multiplication are possible, but they do not necessarily lead to quasilinear time in the input if $\omega = 2$: e.g., Sparse Triangle Listing or intermediate $O(n^{\frac{3+\omega}{2}})$ -time problems such as (min, max) product, Dominance product, Equality product, and All-Edges Monochromatic Triangle. Only for a few of these problems, conditional lower bounds give evidence why they do not appear to belong to the first category, e.g. [53, 45, 62, 17].
3. **(difficult)** Problems for which even using fast matrix multiplication, no improved algorithms are known, e.g., APSP, Sliding Window Hamming Distance, Word Break, Context-free Language Reachability, Klee’s Measure Problem. To establish that a problem lies in this category, currently only two hardness assumptions appear applicable: If the problem can express *weights*, a reduction from APSP or more generally the weighted k -Clique hypothesis are plausible, e.g. [64, 9, 11]. A second possibility is a reduction based on the 3-uniform Hyperclique hypothesis [46], which was used, e.g., for Klee’s measure problem in 3D [40].

The NFA Acceptance hypothesis yields a new route to establish that a problem belongs to the third category. We describe two such applications: (1) Context-free language reachability and, more generally, all 2NPDA-complete problems (which suffer from the *cubic bottleneck* in interprocedural program analysis), and (2) the Word Break problem.

CFL Reachability and 2NPDA-hard problems

In Context-free Language (CFL) Reachability for a fixed context-free grammar Γ , we are given an Σ -edge-colored directed graph G and distinguished nodes s, t , and the task is to determine whether there is a walk from s to t such that the sequence of traversed edge colors spells a word in the language given by Γ . The CFL Reachability problem has many applications in program analysis, verification and database theory (see, e.g., the references in [20, 39]). A classic algorithm solves CFL Reachability in time $O(n^3)$ [65], which has been slightly improved to time $O(n^3/\log n)$ [55, 19]. In fact, these algorithms extend to the generalization of computing all pairs (s, t) for which such a walk exists.

The inability to obtain truly subcubic time algorithms for CFL Reachability and related problems has led researchers to investigate its relationship to the recognition problem for two-way nondeterministic pushdown automata (2NPDA), which admits a classic cubic time algorithm due to [5]. Several problems, including CFL Reachability, pushdown automata emptiness, and related problems in data flow analysis, have been proven 2NPDA-complete in the sense that they are subcubic equivalent to 2NPDA recognition [51, 48, 31], see also [20].

Since then, there have been attempts to obtain conditional lower bounds for 2NPDA-complete problems: For *combinatorial* algorithms a conditional lower bound ruling out time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$ was shown in [18]. However, it was proven that obtaining a tight lower bound based on SETH/OVH using deterministic reductions would violate NSETH [20]. Recently, an interesting attempt was made to show that the All-Pairs version of CFL Reachability is strictly harder than matrix multiplication (i.e., does not belong to the first category in the above list) via a reduction from All-Edges Monochromatic Triangle [39].⁷

In Section 3, we show that proving the NFA hypothesis settles the cubic bottleneck of 2NPDA-complete problems by showing that the NFA Acceptance hypothesis implies that CFL Reachability, and thus, all 2NPDA-hard problems, have no truly subcubic algorithms. In particular, this gives conditional optimality of the algorithms due to Yannakakis [65] and Aho et al. [5].

Word Break

In the Word Break problem we are given a string S and a dictionary D (i.e., D is a set of strings) and we ask whether S can be split into dictionary words, i.e., whether we can partition S into substrings such that each substring is in the set D . Denoting the length of S by n and the total length of all dictionary words by m , this problem has a relatively simple randomized algorithm running in time $\tilde{O}(nm^{1/2} + m)$.⁸ This running time was first improved to $\tilde{O}(nm^{1/2-1/18} + m)$ [10] and then to the current state of the art $O(n(m \log m)^{1/3} + m)$ [14]. In [14] it was also shown that Word Break has no combinatorial algorithm running in time $O(nm^{1/3-\varepsilon} + m)$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$, assuming a hypothesis on combinatorial k -Clique. Under standard, non-combinatorial hypotheses, no superlinear running time lower bound is known.

⁷ Unfortunately, the reduction from Monochromatic Triangle to All-Pairs CFL Reachability given in [39] appears to be flawed. In this reduction, a graph is created where every edge in the original graph is replaced by a line graph, which in general leads to a quadratic blow-up in the number of nodes. In personal communication, the authors confirm this issue.

⁸ Throughout the paper we write $\tilde{O}(T) := \bigcup_{c \geq 0} O(T \log^c T)$, where we denote $\log^c T = (\log(T))^c$.

In Section 4, we settle this issue by proving a tight conditional lower bound for Word Break under the NFA Acceptance hypothesis.

1.5 Application II: A static reason for dynamic hardness

In 2015, Henzinger, Forster, Nanongkai and Saranurak [32] formulated the OMv hypothesis which unifies and strengthens many conditional lower bounds for data structure problems and dynamic problems and has since been used in various areas such as graph algorithms [32, 25, 4, 33], string algorithms [22, 38, 21], computational geometry [26, 42], linear algebra [59, 36], formal languages [30], and database theory [13, 16, 37]. In fact, almost all conditional lower bounds for dynamic problems known under BMM or other hypotheses such as 3SUM or APSP can also be shown under the OMv hypothesis.⁹ Thus, there is one reason that allows to rule out faster algorithms for a wealth of problems, without restricting the class of algorithms that may be used, and without any undefined notions.

Interestingly, it turns out that *the NFA Acceptance hypothesis implies the OMv hypothesis*. The reduction is very direct and has nice implications: (1) It establishes NFA Acceptance as a static reason for the hardness of a wealth of dynamic problems. (2) It gives additional reason to believe in the OMv hypothesis, since NFA Acceptance is an additional problem that has been studied for decades and lacks polynomially improved algorithms. (3) We obtain an improved running time for NFA Acceptance by a factor $2^{\Theta(\sqrt{\log n})}$, by the improved algorithm for OMv [41]. (4) Since NFA Acceptance is a static problem, we can try to obtain similar lower bounds as from OMv now for static versions of dynamic problems. We give the reduction in Section 5.

2 Equivalent formulations: Colored Walk Framework

An NFA M is a tuple $(Q, \Sigma, \delta, q_0, F)$ with $\delta \subseteq Q \times \Sigma \times Q$, $q_0 \in Q$ and $F \subseteq Q$. We say that M accepts a string $x \in \Sigma^*$ if and only if there exists some sequence $q_1, \dots, q_{|x|} \in Q$ with $(q_i, x_{i+1}, q_{i+1}) \in \delta$ for all $0 \leq i < |x|$ and $q_{|x|} \in F$. Note that we do not allow ϵ -transitions. The NFA Acceptance problem asks to determine, given an NFA M and string x over Σ , whether M accepts x . We usually use $n = |Q|$ to denote the number of states, $m = |\delta|$ to denote the number of transitions and $\ell = |x|$ to denote the length of the string x .

We are ready to state our hypothesis formally:

► **Hypothesis 2** (NFA Acceptance hypothesis, formal version). *Let $1 \leq \alpha \leq 2$ and $\beta, \epsilon > 0$ be arbitrary. There is no (randomized) algorithm that solves the NFA Acceptance problem for NFAs with n states and $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ transitions, alphabet Σ of size $n^{o(1)}$ and strings of length $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$ in time $O((m\ell)^{1-\epsilon}) = O(n^{(\alpha+\beta)(1-\epsilon)})$.*

It is equivalent to state the hypothesis only for dense NFAs, i.e., $\alpha = 2$, as we show next.

► **Lemma 3.** *The NFA Acceptance hypothesis is equivalent to the following statement: Let $\beta, \epsilon > 0$ be arbitrary. There is no (randomized) algorithm that solves the NFA Acceptance problem for NFAs with n states and $m = \Theta(n^2)$ transitions, alphabet Σ of size $n^{o(1)}$ and strings of length $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$ in time $O((n^2\ell)^{1-\epsilon}) = O(n^{(2+\beta)(1-\epsilon)})$.*

Proof. Assume that there exists $1 \leq \alpha' < 2$ and $\beta' > 0$ such that we can solve the problem with $m = \Theta(n^{\alpha'})$ transitions and sequence length $\ell = \Theta(n^{\beta'})$ in time $O(n^{(\alpha'+\beta')(1-\epsilon)})$. We define $\alpha = 2$, $\beta = (2/\alpha')\beta'$ and consider any instance with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha) = \Theta(n^2)$ and

⁹ Lower bounds from SETH seem to be an exception from this rule of thumb.

$\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$. Create an equivalent instance by simply introducing $n^{2/\alpha'} \geq n$ additional isolated states. This instance has $n' = \Theta(n^{2/\alpha'})$ states, the same number of transitions $m' = m = \Theta(n^2) = \Theta((n')^{\alpha'})$ and the same sequence length $\ell' = \ell = \Theta(n^\beta) = \Theta((n')^{\beta'})$. By our assumption, we can solve this instance in time $O((n')^{(\alpha'+\beta')(1-\epsilon)}) = O(n^{(\alpha+\beta)(1-\epsilon)})$. This contradicts the assumption for $\alpha = 2$ and an appropriate β , as desired. ◀

Furthermore, our conditional lower bounds for CFL Reachability and OMv follow already from the setting $\alpha = 2$ and $\beta = 1$, which can be viewed as the core setting of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis: Determining whether a given n -state NFA M over a $n^{o(1)}$ -sized alphabet Σ accepts a given length- n string x requires time $n^{3-o(1)}$ in the worst case.

In the remainder of the section, we discuss several equivalent formulations of the NFA Acceptance hypothesis, using a framework of graph problems that we refer to as Colored Walk problems.

2.1 Colored Walk Framework

We study the following variants of the Colored Walk problem.

DIRECTED/UNDIRECTED NODE- $C(n)$ -COLORED WALK

Input: directed/undirected graph $G = (V, E)$ with $n = |V|$ and $m = |E|$, vertices $s, t \in V$, coloring $c: V \rightarrow \{1, \dots, C(n)\}$, integer ℓ , color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ

Question: Exist $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with $(v_{i-1}, v_i) \in E$ and $c(v_i) = c_i$ for all $1 \leq i \leq \ell$?

DIRECTED/UNDIRECTED EDGE- $C(n)$ -COLORED WALK

Input: directed/undirected graph $G = (V, E)$ with $n = |V|$ and $m = |E|$, vertices $s, t \in V$, coloring $c: E \rightarrow \{1, \dots, C(n)\}$, integer ℓ , color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ

Question: Exist $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with $(v_{i-1}, v_i) \in E$ and $c(v_{i-1}, v_i) = c_i$ for all i ?

Note that all of these problems can be solved in time $O(m\ell)$. We show that most of these problem variants are equivalent, in the following sense. Note that statement A1 below is exactly the NFA Acceptance hypothesis.

► **Lemma 4** (Colored Walk Framework). *Let $\alpha \in [1, 2], \beta > 0$. All of the following statements A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, and B4 are equivalent:*

A *Restricted to instances with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$, there is no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\epsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\epsilon > 0$ for the problem...*

1 ... NFA Acceptance with alphabet size $n^{o(1)}$.

2 ... Directed Node-2-Colored Walk.

3 ... Directed Node- n -Colored Walk.

4 ... Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk.

5 ... Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk.

B *Restricted to instances with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$, there is no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\epsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\epsilon > 0$ for the problem...*

1 ... Undirected Node-2-Colored Walk.

2 ... Undirected Node- n -Colored Walk.

3 ... Undirected Edge-2-Colored Walk.

4 ... Undirected Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk.

The proof is deferred to Section 6.

From now on, we use the term *Colored Walk* for any of the above problems. In particular, in the reductions based on the NFA Acceptance hypothesis, we can always use the variant that is easiest to work with. In particular, all of our reductions in the following sections will start from Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk (i.e., we will use statement A4). By the above lemma, we thus obtain conditional lower bounds under the NFA Acceptance hypothesis.

We leave it as an open problem whether Directed/Undirected Edge- $C(n)$ -Colored Walk for $C(n) \gg n^{o(1)}$ is also equivalent to the above problems.

In Section 6, we also show equivalence of Colored Walk to a version without source and target nodes s, t , specifically, the version in which we determine existence of *any* walk in the graph with a given color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ . Such versions occur e.g., for string matching in labeled graphs or regular path queries.

3 Hardness of CFL Reachability

Recall that in the CFL Reachability problem we are given a context-free grammar Γ describing a language $L(\Gamma)$ over a terminal set Σ as well as a directed graph $G = (V, E)$ with designated vertices $s, t \in V$ where every edge $e \in E$ is labeled by a terminal $\sigma(e) \in \Sigma$. We call any sequence of terminals $w \in \Sigma^*$ a *word*, and we say that a walk v_0, v_1, \dots, v_ℓ in G *spells the word* $\sigma(v_0, v_1)\sigma(v_1, v_2) \dots \sigma(v_{\ell-1}, v_\ell)$, i.e., we concatenate all edge labels along the walk. The task is to decide whether there is a walk from s to t in G spelling a word in $L(\Gamma)$, i.e., whether there is a walk $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ such that $\sigma(v_0, v_1)\sigma(v_1, v_2) \dots \sigma(v_{\ell-1}, v_\ell) \in L(\Gamma)$. We write $n = |V|, m = |E|$ and we assume that Γ is fixed, in particular it has constant size and any running time dependence on the size of Γ can be ignored.

The CFL Reachability problem has a classic algorithm running in time $O(n^3)$ [65], which has been slightly improved to time $O(n^3/\log n)$ [19]. For *combinatorial* algorithms a conditional lower bound ruling out time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$ was shown in [18].

We prove a tight lower bound for CFL Reachability under the NFA Acceptance hypothesis:

► **Theorem 5.** *There is a fixed grammar Γ such that the CFL Reachability problem on Γ has no $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$ assuming the NFA Acceptance hypothesis.*

Proof. We reduce from Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk. To this end, we are given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$ with colors $c: E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, designated vertices $s, t \in V$, and a color sequence $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, 2\}$. Let $n = |V|$ and $m = |E|$. We assume the graph to be dense (i.e., $m = \Theta(n^2)$) and we assume $\ell = \Theta(n)$. By the NFA Acceptance hypothesis in the setting $\alpha = 2, \beta = 1$, there is no algorithm solving all such instances of Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$.

We construct an instance of CFL Reachability as follows. The context-free grammar Γ is the language of well-formed expressions on two types of parenthesis (also known as Dyck-2) given by the nonterminal S , the terminals $(1,)_1, (2,)_2$, and the production rules $S \rightarrow SS, S \rightarrow (1S)_1, S \rightarrow (1)_1, S \rightarrow (2S)_2, S \rightarrow (2)_2$. We fix this grammar, in particular it has constant size.

We construct a directed graph $G' = (V', E')$ by starting from the graph G , adding a directed path of length ℓ on nodes u_0, u_1, \dots, u_ℓ , and identifying the nodes t and u_0 . In other words, we attach a path u_1, \dots, u_ℓ to the node t , and we use u_0 as another name for node t . We set $s' := s$ and $t' := u_\ell$. For each edge $(u, v) \in E$ we set the label to $\sigma(e) := (c(u, v))$. For each $1 \leq i \leq \ell$ we set the label $\sigma(u_{i-1}, u_i) :=)_{c_{\ell+1-i}}$. This finishes the construction of the CFL Reachability instance $(\Gamma, G', s', t', \sigma)$.

Note that any walk from s' to t' in G' ends with the path u_0, u_1, \dots, u_ℓ and thus with the labels $)_{c_\ell})(_{c_{\ell-1}} \dots)_{c_2})(_{c_1}$. Since there are no other edge labels with closing brackets, we must choose a walk from $s' = s$ to $u_0 = t$ spelling the word $(_{c_1}(_{c_2} \dots (_{c_{\ell-1}}(_{c_\ell}$ in order to match all parentheses. Such a walk corresponds to a walk from s to t in G with color sequence c_1, c_2, \dots, c_ℓ . This shows that the constructed CFL Reachability instance is a YES-instance if and only if the given Colored Walk instance is a YES-instance, and thus shows correctness of the reduction.

Note that the constructed graph G' consists of $n + \ell - 1 = O(n)$ nodes (using our assumption on ℓ). Therefore, any algorithm for CFL Reachability running in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ solves the given Colored Walk instance in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$. This contradicts the NFA Acceptance hypothesis (as discussed in the first paragraph). ◀

4 Hardness of Word Break

Recall that in the Word Break problem, we are given a string S and a dictionary D (i.e., D is a set of strings) and we ask whether S can be split into dictionary words, i.e., whether we can partition S into substrings such that each substring is in the set D . We denote the length of S by n and the total length of all strings in D by m . In this section, we prove that the NFA Acceptance hypothesis implies optimality (up to subpolynomial factors) of the $O(n(m \log m)^{1/3} + m)$ time algorithm given in [14].

▶ **Theorem 6.** *The Word Break problem has no $O(nm^{1/3-\varepsilon} + m)$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$ assuming the NFA Acceptance hypothesis. This even holds restricted to $m = \Theta(n^\gamma)$ for any constant $\gamma \in (0, 3/2)$.*

Note that the $O(n(m \log m)^{1/3} + m)$ algorithm from [14] solves Word Break in time $\tilde{O}(m)$ whenever $m = \Omega(n^{3/2})$. Since this is near-linear, there is no need for proving a fine-grained lower bound in this case. Therefore, it is natural that we assume $\gamma < 3/2$ in the above theorem.

Proof of Theorem 6. In the following proof, we use the upper case letters N and M for the parameters of Word Break in order to differentiate the parameters of Colored Walk.

We reduce from Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk. To this end, we are given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$ with colors $c: E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, designated vertices $s, t \in V$, and a color sequence $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, 2\}$. Let $n = |V|$ and $m = |E|$. We assume the graph to be dense (i.e., $m = \Theta(n^2)$) and we assume $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$ for $\beta := 3/\gamma - 1$. By the NFA Acceptance hypothesis in the setting $\alpha = 2, \beta$, there is no algorithm solving all such instances of Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk in time $O(n^{2+\beta-\varepsilon})$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$.

We use the notation 0^k to denote the string of length k consisting of k times the letter 0. We construct the string S and the dictionary D over alphabet $\{0, 1, 2\}$ as follows:

$$S := 0^s c_1 0^n c_2 0^n c_3 \dots 0^n c_{\ell-1} 0^n c_\ell 0^{n-t}.$$

$$D := \{0^u c(u, v) 0^{n-v} \mid (u, v) \in E\}.$$

Correctness

We claim that the string S can be split into dictionary words if and only if there is a walk from s to t with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ in G . This is straightforward to show: To match the prefix $0^s c_1$ we must choose a dictionary word corresponding to an edge (s, v_1) of color c_1 , and the remaining string starts with the prefix $0^{v_1} c_2$. Generally, in the i th step the

remaining string is of the form $0^{v_i}c_i0^n c_{i+1} \dots 0^n c_\ell 0^{n-t}$, so in order to match the prefix $0^{v_i}c_i$ we must choose a dictionary word corresponding to an edge (v_i, v_{i+1}) of color c_i . The last vertex v_ℓ must satisfy $v_\ell = t$ in order to match the suffix 0^{n-t} . Hence, any valid partitioning of the string S into dictionary words corresponds to a walk $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ in G , and this is an equivalence.

Running Time

The length of the string S is $N = \Theta(\ell n) = \Theta(n^{1+\beta})$, by the assumption on ℓ . The total length of all strings in D is $M = \Theta(nm) = \Theta(n^3)$, by the assumption that G is dense. Note that $M = \Theta(N^{3/(1+\beta)}) = \Theta(N^\gamma)$ by our setting of $\beta = 3/\gamma - 1$, so we constructed instances with the desired setting of parameters. If Word Break can be solved in time $O(NM^{1/3-\varepsilon} + M)$, then by plugging in the bounds on N and M , our setting of Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk can be solved in time $O(n^{1+\beta}(n^3)^{1/3-\varepsilon} + n^3) = O(n^{2+\beta-3\varepsilon} + n^3)$. Since $\gamma < 3/2$ we have $\beta = 3/\gamma - 1 > 1$ and thus by setting $\varepsilon' := \min\{3\varepsilon, 2 + \beta - 3\} > 0$ we can bound the running time by $O(n^{2+\beta-\varepsilon'})$. This contradicts the NFA Acceptance hypothesis in the setting $\alpha = 2, \beta$. ◀

5 Hardness of OMv

In the Online Boolean Matrix-Vector Multiplication (OMv) problem, an algorithm is initially given an $n \times n$ Boolean matrix M . Then the following repeats for n rounds: In the i th round, the algorithm is given an n -dimensional Boolean vector v_i and has to compute Mv_i . The algorithm must compute the output Mv_i before it can proceed to the next round. The running time of an OMv algorithm is the total running time for the initialization and all n rounds together.

By naively multiplying Mv_i in time $O(n^2)$ in each of the n rounds, OMv can be solved in time $O(n^3)$. This running time has been improved to $n^3/2^{\Omega(\sqrt{\log n})}$ [41]. The OMv Hypothesis, due to Henzinger et al. [32], postulates that OMv cannot be solved in strongly subcubic time.

► **Hypothesis 7 (OMv Hypothesis).** *For any constant $\varepsilon > 0$, OMv has no $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm (with an error probability of at most $1/3$).*

Many data structure problems and dynamic problems have matching lower bounds under the OMv Hypothesis, as its usefulness has been established in various areas such as graph algorithms [32, 25, 4, 33], string algorithms [22, 38, 21], computational geometry [26, 42], linear algebra [59, 36], formal languages [30], and database theory [13, 16, 37].

We show the following relation to the NFA Acceptance hypothesis:

► **Theorem 8.** *The NFA Acceptance hypothesis implies the OMv Hypothesis.*

In particular, all implications of the OMv Hypothesis shown in [32, 25, 4, 33, 22, 38, 21, 26, 42, 59, 36, 30, 13, 16, 37] also hold under the NFA Acceptance hypothesis.

Proof of Theorem 8. We reduce from Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk. To this end, we are given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$ with colors $c: E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, designated vertices $s, t \in V$, and a color sequence $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, 2\}$. We assume the graph to be dense ($m = \Theta(n^2)$) and we assume $\ell = \Theta(n)$. By the NFA Acceptance hypothesis in the setting $\alpha = 2, \beta = 1$, there is no algorithm solving all such instances of Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$.

Let $N := \max\{n, \ell\}$. If $N > n$ we add $N - n$ isolated dummy vertices to G .

Consider for each color $c \in \{1, 2\}$ the *transposed* adjacency matrix $M^{(c)}$ corresponding to the edges with color c , i.e., $M^{(c)} \in \{0, 1\}^{N \times N}$ where $M_{u,v}^{(c)} = 1$ if and only if $(v, u) \in E$ and $c(v, u) = c$. Let $u_0 \in \{0, 1\}^N$ be the indicator vector for s , i.e., $u_0[v] = 1$ if and only if $v = s$.

Suppose there is an algorithm \mathcal{A} solving OMv in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$ for some $\varepsilon > 0$. We use \mathcal{A} to preprocess $M^{(1)}$ and $M^{(2)}$ (as independent OMv instances). For each $i = 1, \dots, \ell$, we compute $u_i := M^{(c_i)}u_{i-1}$ using algorithm \mathcal{A} on the corresponding OMv instance. Finally, we accept the colored walk instance if and only if $u_\ell[t] = 1$.

Inductively, it is straightforward to show that $u_i[v] = 1$ if and only if there is a walk from s to v with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_i ; hence correctness follows. Note that for each of the two OMv instances we execute at most $\ell \leq N$ rounds (and we can add dummy rounds to obtain exactly N rounds). Therefore, algorithm \mathcal{A} solves both instances in total time $O(N^{3-\varepsilon})$ over all rounds. Since $N = \max\{n, \ell\} = O(n)$ by our assumption on ℓ , it follows that we can solve the given Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk instance in time $O(n^{3-\varepsilon})$, contradicting the NFA Acceptance hypothesis (as discussed in the first paragraph). This finishes the proof.

Remark: As described above, the reduction is not many-one, since we create two instances of OMv corresponding to the matrices $M^{(1)}$ and $M^{(2)}$. However, by a slight adaptation we can make the reduction many-one. To this end, we construct the matrix

$$M = \begin{pmatrix} M^{(1)} & 0 \\ 0 & M^{(2)} \end{pmatrix},$$

which stacks the matrices $M^{(1)}, M^{(2)}$ in block matrices along the main diagonal. We use algorithm \mathcal{A} to preprocess the OMv instance M . Then given a vector $u \in \{0, 1\}^N$ and a color $c \in \{1, 2\}$, we can compute the Boolean product $M^{(c)}u$ by one call to the OMv instance M : To this end, we set $u' := (u_1, \dots, u_N, 0, \dots, 0) \in \{0, 1\}^{2N}$ if $c = 1$, and $u' := (0, \dots, 0, u_1, \dots, u_N) \in \{0, 1\}^{2N}$ if $c = 2$, and we call \mathcal{A} to compute Mu' . This yields $M^{(c)}u$, padded with some zeroes. Therefore, each step $u_i := M^{(c_i)}u_{i-1}$ performed in the above reduction can be implemented by one call to the OMv instance M . This makes the reduction many-one. ◀

6 Equivalences of Colored Walk

In this section, we prove the equivalences of Colored Walk problems stated in Lemma 4. We also prove an equivalence to a version without source and target nodes, see Lemma 20 at the end of this section. Throughout this section we abbreviate Colored Walk as CW.

► **Lemma 4** (Colored Walk Framework). *Let $\alpha \in [1, 2], \beta > 0$. All of the following statements A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, and B4 are equivalent:*

A *Restricted to instances with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$, there is no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$ for the problem...*

1 ... *NFA Acceptance with alphabet size $n^{o(1)}$.*

2 ... *Directed Node-2-Colored Walk.*

3 ... *Directed Node- n -Colored Walk.*

4 ... *Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk.*

5 ... *Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk.*

B *Restricted to instances with $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$, there is no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$ for the problem...*

1 ... *Undirected Node-2-Colored Walk.*

- 2 ... Undirected Node- n -Colored Walk.
- 3 ... Undirected Edge-2-Colored Walk.
- 4 ... Undirected Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk.

For the node version of the problem, we say that the *(node) color sequence* of a walk v_0, v_1, \dots, v_k is the sequence $c(v_1), c(v_2), \dots, c(v_k)$. Similarly, for the edge version the *(edge) color sequence* of a walk v_0, v_1, \dots, v_k is the sequence $c(v_0, v_1), c(v_1, v_2), \dots, c(v_{k-1}, v_k)$.

The remainder of this section is devoted to the proof of Lemma 4 (and to the proof of Lemma 20). To this end, we define the following notion of reductions. Here, a *parameter* is a function mapping any instance to a natural number, e.g., n, m, ℓ are parameters of the above problems.

► **Definition 9.** Let X, Y be problems with the same set of parameters P . We say that there is a P -preserving (many-one) reduction from X to Y , written $X \leq_P Y$ if there is an algorithm A that given an instance I of X computes an equivalent instance J of Y such that for all parameters $p \in P$ we have $p(J) \leq p(I)^{1+o(1)}$, and A runs in almost-linear time $N^{1+o(1)}$ in its input size N .

The following lemmas show $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving reductions between the problems from Lemma 4.

► **Lemma 10.** Directed Node-2-CW $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ Directed Edge-2-CW

Proof. Given a directed graph G with node coloring $c: V \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, we define the edge coloring $c': E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$ by setting $c'(u, v) := c(v)$ for all edges $(u, v) \in E$. This yields an equivalent Directed Edge-2-CW instance, since for any walk v_0, v_1, \dots, v_ℓ in G , the sequence of node colors $c(v_1), \dots, c(v_\ell)$ is the same as the sequence of edge colors $c'(v_0, v_1), \dots, c'(v_{\ell-1}, v_\ell)$. The reduction preserves the exact values of all parameters. ◀

► **Lemma 11.** Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -CW $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ NFA Acceptance with $n^{o(1)}$ terminals

Proof. This is a simple statement, as NFA Acceptance with $n^{o(1)}$ terminals is the generalization of Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -CW where we allow loops and we allow multiple edges (with different labels) between two nodes. Since the two problems are formulated in a different language, we make the correspondence explicit: Given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$ with designated vertices $s, t \in V$ and edge coloring $c: E \rightarrow \{1, \dots, C\}$ as well as a color sequence $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, \dots, C\}$, we construct the NFA $M = (Q, \Sigma, \delta, q_0, F)$ by setting $Q := V$, $\Sigma := \{1, \dots, C\}$, $\delta := \{(u, c(u, v), v) \mid (u, v) \in E\}$, $q_0 := s$, $F := \{t\}$, and we construct the string $S := c_1 c_2 \dots c_\ell \in \Sigma^\ell$. It is straightforward to show that M accepts S if and only if there is a walk from s to t with color sequence $c_1 c_2 \dots c_\ell$ in G . All parameters are preserved since $|Q| = |V|$, $|\delta| = |E|$ and ℓ remains unchanged. ◀

► **Lemma 12.** NFA Acceptance with $n^{o(1)}$ terminals $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ Directed Node- $n^{o(1)}$ -CW

Proof. Given an NFA $M = (Q, \Sigma, \delta, q_0, F)$ with set of states Q , input alphabet Σ , transitions $\delta \subseteq Q \times \Sigma \times Q$, initial state q_0 , and set of accepting states $F \subseteq Q$, as well as a string $S \in \Sigma^\ell$, we first transform it into an equivalent instance without loops and with exactly one accepting state.

To remove loops, we replace the states Q by two copies: $\hat{Q} := Q \times \{1, 2\}$. Each transition (q, σ, q') is replaced by two transitions $((q, 1), \sigma, (q', 2))$ and $((q, 2), \sigma, (q', 1))$; note that this ensures that we have no loops (i.e., no transition starts and ends in the same state). We also replace q_0 by $\hat{q}_0 := (q_0, 1)$ and F by $\hat{F} := F \times \{1, 2\}$. It is easy to check that the new NFA accepts S if and only if the old NFA accepts S , and the size of the NFA is only changed by a constant factor.

To ensure exactly one accepting state, we add a new state f_0 to \hat{Q} . We fix an arbitrary symbol $\sigma \in \Sigma$, and we add transitions (f, σ, f_0) for all $f \in \hat{F}$. Finally, we replace \hat{F} by $\{f_0\}$ and S by $S\sigma$. Note that this results in an equivalent instance with exactly one accepting state and all sizes stay the same up to constant factors. Therefore, in the following we assume without loss of generality that the given NFA $M = (Q, \Sigma, \delta, q_0, F)$ satisfies $F = \{f_0\}$ and has no loops. Moreover, we can assume without loss of generality that $\Sigma = \{1, \dots, |\Sigma|\}$.

We define a graph $G = (V, E)$ with vertex set $V = Q \times \Sigma$. For each transition $(q, \sigma', q') \in \delta$, we add the edges $((q, \sigma), (q', \sigma')) \in E$ for all $\sigma \in \Sigma$. We define the vertex coloring $c: V \rightarrow \{1, \dots, |\Sigma|\}$ by $c((q, \sigma)) = \sigma$. Observe that for any choice of “starting color” $\sigma_0 \in \{1, \dots, |\Sigma|\}$, the mapping from any transition sequence $q_0 \xrightarrow{\sigma_1} q_1 \xrightarrow{\sigma_2} q_2 \dots \xrightarrow{\sigma_\ell} q_\ell$ in M to the walk $v_0 := (q_0, \sigma_0), v_1 := (q_1, \sigma_1), \dots, v_\ell := (q_\ell, \sigma_\ell)$ in G is indeed a one-to-one mapping from transition sequences in M to walks in G starting in the node (q_0, σ_0) such that the string read by the transition sequence equals the color sequence of the walk. In particular, M accepts the string S if and only if there is a walk from $s := (q_0, \sigma_0)$ to $t := (f_0, S[\ell])$ in G with color sequence $S[1], \dots, S[\ell]$. Thus, for any NFA M we can construct, in linear time in the output, an equivalent Directed Node- $|\Sigma|$ -CW instance.

We verify that the parameters are preserved for $|\Sigma| = |Q|^{o(1)}$: The number of vertices in G is bounded by $|V| = |Q| \cdot |\Sigma| = |Q|^{1+o(1)}$, similarly, we have $|E| \leq |\delta| \cdot |\Sigma| = |\delta|^{1+o(1)}$. Finally, the length ℓ of the color sequence equals the length of the string S . ◀

► **Lemma 13.** *Directed Node- n -CW $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ Directed Node-2-CW*

Proof. Given a directed graph G with node coloring $c: V \rightarrow \{1, \dots, C\}$, we let $B := \lceil \log_2 C \rceil$ and define a graph $G' = (V', E')$ with vertex set $V' = V \times [B]$. For every edge $(u, v) \in E$, we add the edge $((u, B), (v, 1)) \in E'$, and for every $v \in V$ and $1 \leq i < B$, we add the “path” edge $((v, i), (v, i+1)) \in E'$. For a color $c \in \{1, \dots, C\}$, let $\text{bin}(c, i)$ be the i -th bit in the B -bit binary representation of c . We define the node coloring $c': V' \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$ by $c'((v, i)) = \text{bin}(c(v), i) + 1$ for all $v \in V, i \in [B]$. Thus, for any Directed Node- n -CW instance $G, s, t, (c_1, \dots, c_\ell)$, we define a corresponding instance on the graph G' with source (s, B) , target (t, B) and color sequence $c'_1, \dots, c'_{\ell B}$ where we set $c'_{(j-1)B+i} := \text{bin}(c_j, i) + 1$ for all $1 \leq j \leq \ell$ and $1 \leq i \leq B$. It is straightforward to verify that v_0, v_1, \dots, v_ℓ is a walk in G with color sequence $c_1 = c(v_1), \dots, c_\ell = c(v_\ell)$ if and only if $v'_0, v'_1, \dots, v'_{\ell B}$ with $v'_{(j-1)B+i} = (v_j, i), 1 \leq j \leq \ell, 1 \leq i \leq B$ is a walk in G' with color sequence $c'_1 = c'(v'_1), \dots, c'_{\ell B} = c'(v'_{\ell B})$.

Note that for $C = n$, we have $B = O(\log n)$ and thus $|V'| = B|V| \leq |V|^{1+o(1)}, |E'| = |E| + |V|B \leq |E|^{1+o(1)}$ and $\ell B \leq \ell^{1+o(1)}$. ◀

To reduce from Node-2-CW in a *directed* graph G to Edge-2-CW in an *undirected* graph G' , the straightforward approach is the following: each vertex v is replaced by two vertices, v_{in} and v_{out} , such that a directed edge (u, v) can be represented by the undirected edge $\{u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}\}$. Additionally, we introduce the edges $\{v_{\text{in}}, v_{\text{out}}\}$ of color $c(v)$. If we were allowed to introduce an additional color $\tilde{c} \notin \{1, 2\}$, we could label each edge $\{u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}\}$ with \tilde{c} , and any walks with node color sequence c_1, c_2, \dots, c_ℓ in G would uniquely correspond to walks with edge colors sequence in $\tilde{c}, c_1, \tilde{c}, c_2, \dots, \tilde{c}, c_\ell$ and vice versa. To avoid the blow-up in the number of colors, however, we must reuse a color for \tilde{c} , say $\tilde{c} = 1$. Since this would allow a walk to use an edge $\{u_{\text{in}}, v_{\text{out}}\}$ in the “reverse” direction towards u_{in} whenever we are supposed to “check” that a node has color 1, we might obtain illegal transitions in the resulting walk. An analogous reasoning applies for a reduction to undirected Node-2-CW.

We use slightly more involved gadgetry for both reductions: For a given directed graph $G = (V, E)$ and an integer P , we create an *undirected* graph $G' = (V', E')$ with vertex set $V' = \{v_{\text{in}}, v_{\text{out}}, v^{(1)}, \dots, v^{(P)} \mid v \in V\}$ as follows: we introduce, for each edge $(u, v) \in E$, the

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edges $\{u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}\}$ in E' , as well as, for all $v \in V$, all “path edges” $\{v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}\}$, $\{v^{(P)}, v_{\text{out}}\}$ and $\{v^{(i)}, v^{(i+1)}\}$ for all $1 \leq i < P$. By choosing the color sequences for all path vertices/edges appropriately, we will be able to enforce that every edge is used in “forward” direction, i.e., any feasible walk traverses an edge $\{u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}\}$, then all path edges toward v_{out} , then an edge $\{v_{\text{out}}, w_{\text{in}}\}$, and so on.

► **Lemma 14.** *Directed Node-2-CW $\leq_{\{n,m,\ell\}}$ Undirected Edge-2-CW*

Proof. Given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$, we construct the undirected version G' using path length $P = 4$ as described above. We define the coloring $c' : E \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$ as follows: for all $(u, v) \in E$, we set $c'(u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}) = 1$. For each $v \in V$, we set the colors of the path edges to

$$(c'(v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}), c'(v^{(1)}, v^{(2)}), c'(v^{(2)}, v^{(3)}), c'(v^{(3)}, v^{(4)}), c'(v^{(4)}, v_{\text{out}})) := (2, c(v), c(v), 1, 2).$$

The main property of this construction is captured by the following claim. In the remainder of the proof, for any $c \in \{1, 2\}$ and $v \in V$ we set:

$$\text{col}(c) := (2, c, c, 1, 2) \quad \text{and} \quad \text{path}(v) := (v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}, v^{(2)}, v^{(3)}, v^{(4)}, v_{\text{out}}).$$

▷ **Claim 15.** Let $v \in V$ and $c \in \{1, 2\}$. There is a walk $v_{\text{in}} = z_0, z_1, \dots, z_5$ in G' with edge color sequence $\text{col}(c)$ if and only if $c = c(v)$ and $(z_0, z_1, z_2, z_3, z_4, z_5) = \text{path}(v)$.

Proof. If $c = c(v)$, then the walk $\text{path}(v)$ clearly has edge color sequence $(2, c, c, 1, 2)$. For the converse, we show that if such a walk exist, we must have $c(v) = c$ and $z_5 = v_{\text{out}}$ (from which the claim follows, since $\text{path}(v)$ is the only walk from v_{in} to v_{out} using 5 edges). To do this, we analyze all possible values of z_i for a walk $v_{\text{in}} = z_0, z_1, \dots, z_i$ with the corresponding color sequence prefix of $(2, c, c, 1, 2)$:

- $z_1 = v^{(1)}$ always holds, as $\{v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}\}$ is the only edge adjacent to v_{in} that has color 2, because the edges $\{u_{\text{out}}, v_{\text{in}}\}$ have color 1.
- Consider the case $c = 1$:
 - If $c(v) \neq c = 1$, then there is no edge leaving $z_1 = v^{(1)}$ with color $c = 1$. Thus we may assume in the remainder of the case that $c(v) = c = 1$.
 - It is straightforward to verify that in this case, $z_2 = v^{(2)}$, $z_3 \in \{v^{(1)}, v^{(3)}\}$ (since both edges adjacent to $z_2 = v^{(2)}$ have color $c(v) = c = 1$), and $z_4 \in \{v^{(2)}, v^{(4)}\}$ (by analogous reasoning for the edge color 1).
 - Finally, as desired, $z_5 = v_{\text{out}}$ must hold, since among $\{v^{(2)}, v^{(4)}\}$, only $v^{(4)}$ has an adjacent edge of color 2, which leads to v_{out} . This yields the claim for $c = 1$.
- We analyze the remaining case $c = 2$:
 - We have $z_2 = v_{\text{in}}$, or, only if $c(v) = c = 2$, possibly $z_2 = v^{(2)}$.
 - Likewise, since $\{v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}\}$ is the only edge adjacent to v_{in} with color $c = 2$, we must have $z_3 = v^{(1)}$, or, only if $c(v) = c = 2$, possibly $z_3 = v^{(3)}$.
 - Note that $v^{(1)}$ only has an adjacent edge of color 1 if $c(v) = 1 \neq c$. In contrast, if $c(v) = c = 2$, $v^{(3)}$ has its only adjacent edge of color 1 to $v^{(4)}$. Thus, we have either $z_4 = v^{(2)}$, which can only happen if $c(v) \neq c$, or $z_4 = v^{(4)}$, which can only happen if $c(v) = c$.
 - Finally, $z_5 = v_{\text{out}}$ and $c(v) = c$ must hold, since in the case $c \neq c(v)$, $v^{(2)}$ has no adjacent edges of color 2, while $v^{(4)}$ has an edge of color 2 to v_{out} . ◁

Given a Directed Node-2-CW instance G , $s, t \in V$ and c_1, \dots, c_ℓ , we construct, in linear time in the output, an Undirected Edge-2-CW instance G' with source s_{out} , target t_{out} and color sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$. For any walk $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ in G , the walk $v_0, \text{path}(v_1), \text{path}(v_2), \dots, \text{path}(v_\ell)$ in G' has the desired color sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$ by the above claim. Conversely, we see that for each color substring $1, \text{col}(c_i)$ any walk in G' that starts in some node u_{out} is of the form $(u_{\text{out}}, \text{path}(v))$ for some $v \in V$ with $(u, v) \in E$ and $c(v) = c_i$, since the only 1-colored edges adjacent to u_{out} lead to some v_{in} with $(u, v) \in E$ and the above claim proves that the walk $\text{path}(v)$ must follow, which requires $c(v) = c_i$. By repeated application of this fact, any walk in G' with color sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$ corresponds to a walk in G with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ , as desired. Note that all parameters have increased by at most a constant factor, which yields the desired reduction. \blacktriangleleft

For a reduction to Undirected *Node-2-CW*, we imitate the above reduction by defining a suitable node color sequence for path nodes. The analysis is slightly simpler than for Edge-2-CW.

► **Lemma 16.** *Directed Node-2-CW* $\leq_{\{n,m,\ell\}}$ *Undirected Node-2-CW*

Proof. Given a directed graph $G = (V, E)$, we construct the undirected version G' using path length $P = 4$ as described above. We define the coloring $c' : V' \rightarrow \{1, 2\}$, as follows: for all $v \in V$, we set $c'(v_{\text{in}}) = c'(v_{\text{out}}) = 1$ and set

$$(c'(v^{(1)}), c'(v^{(2)}), c'(v^{(3)}), c'(v^{(4)})) := (2, c(v), 2, 2).$$

The main property of this construction is captured by the following claim. In the remainder of the proof, for any $c \in \{1, 2\}$ and $v \in V$ we set:

$$\text{col}(c) := (2, c, 2, 2, 1) \quad \text{and} \quad \text{path}(v) := (v_{\text{in}}, v^{(1)}, v^{(2)}, v^{(3)}, v^{(4)}, v_{\text{out}}).$$

▷ **Claim 17.** Let $v \in V$ and $c \in \{1, 2\}$. There is a walk $v_{\text{in}} = z_0, z_1, \dots, z_5$ with color sequence $\text{col}(c)$ in G' if and only if $c = c(v)$ and $(z_0, z_1, z_2, z_3, z_4, z_5) = \text{path}(v)$.

Proof. If $c = c(v)$, then the walk $\text{path}(v)$ clearly has edge color sequence $(2, c, 2, 2, 1)$. For the converse, we show that if such a walk exist, we must have $c(v) = c$ and $z_5 = v_{\text{out}}$ (from which the claim follows, since $\text{path}(v)$ is the only walk from v_{in} to v_{out} using 5 edges). To do this, we analyze all possible values of z_i for a walk $v_{\text{in}} = z_0, z_1, \dots, z_i$ with the corresponding color sequence prefix of $(2, c, 2, 2, 1)$:

- We have $z_1 = v^{(1)}$, since $v^{(1)}$ is the only neighbor of v_{in} with color 2.
- We have $z_2 = v_{\text{in}}$ (which might happen if $c = 1$), or $z_2 = v^{(2)}$ (which can happen if and only if $c = c(v)$).
- Since the only neighbor of v_{in} with color 2 is $v^{(1)}$, we have $z_3 = v^{(1)}$ or $z_3 = v^{(3)}$ (the latter can happen if and only if $c = c(v)$).
- We have $z_4 = v^{(2)}$ (which might happen if $c(v) = 2$), or $z_4 = v^{(4)}$ (which can happen if and only if $c = c(v)$).
- Since $v^{(2)}$ has no neighbor of color 1, we have $z_5 = v^{(5)}$, which can happen if and only if $c = c(v)$, as desired. \triangleleft

The remainder of the reduction is analogous to the proof of Lemma 14: Given a Directed Node-2-CW instance G , $s, t \in V$ and color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ , we construct, in linear time in the output, an Undirected Node-2-CW instance G' with source s_{out} , target t_{out} and color

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sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$. For any walk $s = v_0, v_1, \dots, v_\ell = t$ with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ in G , the walk $v_0, \text{path}(v_1), \text{path}(v_2), \dots, \text{path}(v_\ell)$ in G' has the desired color sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$ by the above claim. Conversely, we see that for each color substring $1, \text{col}(c_i)$ any walk in G' that starts in some u_{out} is of the form $(u_{\text{out}}, \text{path}(v))$ for some $v \in V$ with $(u, v) \in E$ and $c(v) = c_i$, since the only 1-colored edges adjacent to u_{out} lead to some v_{in} with $(u, v) \in E$ and the above claim proves that the walk $\text{path}(v)$ must follow, which requires $c(v) = c_i$. By repeated application of this fact, any walk in G' with color sequence $1, \text{col}(c_1), 1, \text{col}(c_2), \dots, 1, \text{col}(c_\ell)$ corresponds to a walk in G with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ , as desired. Note that all parameters have increased by at most a constant factor, which yields the desired reduction. \blacktriangleleft

Now we combine the above relations to a full equivalence.

► **Lemma 18.** *The following problems are equivalent under $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving reductions:*

- *NFA Acceptance with $n^{o(1)}$ terminals,*
- *Directed Node-2-Colored Walk,*
- *Directed Node- n -Colored Walk,*
- *Directed Edge-2-Colored Walk,*
- *Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk,*
- *Undirected Node-2-Colored Walk,*
- *Undirected Node- n -Colored Walk,*
- *Undirected Edge-2-Colored Walk,*
- *Undirected Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -Colored Walk.*

Proof. The parameter-preserving equivalence of all directed variants for parameters $P = \{n, m, \ell\}$ follows from the following chain of reductions:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{Directed Node-2-CW} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Edge-2-CW} && \text{(by Lemma 10)} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Edge-}n^{o(1)}\text{-CW} && \text{(trivially by definition)} \\
 & \leq_P \text{NFA Acceptance with }n^{o(1)}\text{ terminals} && \text{(by Lemma 11),} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Node-}n^{o(1)}\text{-CW} && \text{(by Lemma 12),} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Node-}n\text{-CW} && \text{(trivially by definition),} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Node-2-CW} && \text{(by Lemma 13).}
 \end{aligned}$$

Note that for any C , Undirected Node- C -CW \leq_P Directed Node- C -CW and Undirected Edge- C -CW \leq_P Directed Edge- C -CW follows trivially by replacing each undirected edge by directed edges in both directions, while reductions in the other direction are given by Lemmas 14 and 16. We use these to also conclude equivalence to the undirected variants by

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{Undirected Node-2-CW} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Undirected Node-}n\text{-CW} && \text{(trivially by definition)} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Node-}n\text{-CW} && \text{(trivially, as argued above)} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Directed Node-2-CW} && \text{(by already established equivalence),} \\
 & \leq_P \text{Undirected Node-2-CW} && \text{(by Lemma 16),}
 \end{aligned}$$

and similarly,

Undirected Edge-2-CW	
\leq_P Undirected Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -CW	(trivially by definition)
\leq_P Directed Edge- $n^{o(1)}$ -CW	(trivially, as argued above)
\leq_P Directed Node-2-CW	(by already established equivalence),
\leq_P Undirected Edge-2-CW	(by Lemma 14). ◀

► **Lemma 19.** *Let $\alpha \in [1, 2], \beta > 0$ and $c \geq 1$. Let X, Y be any problems listed in Lemma 18. If problem X restricted to instances with $m = O(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$ has no $O(n^{c-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$, then the same holds for problem Y .*

Proof. Suppose for the sake of contradiction that problem Y restricted to instances with $m = O(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$ has an algorithm \mathcal{A} running in time $O(n^{c-\varepsilon})$ for some $\varepsilon > 0$. Then we can solve problem X as follows. Given an instance I of problem X with parameters n, m, ℓ satisfying $m = O(n^\alpha), \ell = O(n^\beta)$, run the $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving reduction to obtain an equivalent instance I_0 of Y with parameters n_0, m_0, ℓ_0 . Recall that $n_0 \leq n^{1+o(1)}, m_0 \leq m^{1+o(1)}, \ell_0 \leq \ell^{1+o(1)}$. We set $n_1 := \max\{n_0, m_0^{1/\alpha}, \ell_0^{1/\beta}\}$. We add $n_1 - n_0$ isolated nodes/states to I_0 , resulting in an instance I_1 with parameters $n_1, m_1 = m_0, \ell_1 = \ell_0$. Note that $m_1 \leq n_1^\alpha$ and $\ell_1 \leq n_1^\beta$, so we can run algorithm \mathcal{A} on instance I_1 . Since I_1 is equivalent to I_0 , and thus equivalent to I , this solves the given instance I of problem X .

Tracing the above inequalities, we observe that $n_1 \leq n^{1+o(1)}$, so the running time of algorithm \mathcal{A} on instance I_1 is $O(n_1^{c-\varepsilon}) = O(n^{c-\varepsilon+o(1)})$. The reduction runs in almost-linear time in the input size, i.e., in time $(n + m + \ell)^{1+o(1)} = n^{\max\{\alpha, \beta\}+o(1)}$. Hence, the total time to solve instance I is $O(n^{c-\varepsilon+o(1)} + n^{\max\{\alpha, \beta\}+o(1)})$. If $c \leq \max\{\alpha, \beta\}$ then the conclusion that Y has no $O(n^{c-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm is trivial, so we can assume $c > \max\{\alpha, \beta\}$. After possibly replacing ε by $\min\{\varepsilon, c - \max\{\alpha, \beta\}\}$, we can further bound the running time by $O(n^{c-\varepsilon+o(1)})$. Bounding $n^{o(1)} \leq O(n^{\varepsilon/2})$, the running time becomes $O(n^{c-\varepsilon/2}) = O(n^{c-\varepsilon'})$ for $\varepsilon' := \varepsilon/2$. This contradicts the assumption that problem X restricted to instances with $m = O(n^\alpha), \ell = O(n^\beta)$ has no $O(n^{c-\varepsilon''})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon'' > 0$. ◀

Finally we are ready to prove Lemma 4.

Proof of Lemma 4. Let X, Y be any problems listed in the lemma statement. If the lemma claim corresponding to X holds, then in particular problem X restricted to instances with $m = O(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$ has no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$. Using the $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving reduction from X to Y guaranteed by Lemma 18, by Lemma 19 we obtain the same result for Y , i.e., problem Y restricted to instances with $m = O(n^\alpha)$ and $\ell = O(n^\beta)$ has no $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\varepsilon})$ -time algorithm for any $\varepsilon > 0$. To arrive at the lemma claim corresponding to Y , we need to additionally ensure $m = \Omega(n^\alpha)$ (and for some Y also $\ell = \Omega(n^\beta)$), which we achieve by padding, as follows.

To pad the parameter m , we add n dummy nodes (or states) and among them we add $\Theta(n^\alpha)$ dummy edges (or transitions), to ensure $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$. Since these new nodes and edges are disconnected from the old graph, they do not change the result.

For the directed variants of Colored Walk we can also pad the length ℓ : We add new nodes s_0, s_1 and edges (s_0, s_1) and (s_1, s_0) of color 1 and an edge (s_1, s) of color 2, and we change the color sequence to $1^{2\lceil n^\beta \rceil} 2 c_1 \dots c_\ell$. Observe that there is a walk from s_0 to t with the new color sequence in the new graph if and only if there is a walk from s to t with the old color sequence $c_1 \dots c_\ell$ in the old graph. An analogous construction can be used to pad the number of transitions in a given NFA. Therefore, we can assume $\ell = \Theta(n^\beta)$ for the directed variants of Colored Walk as well as for NFA Acceptance.

Since these constructions change n only by a constant factor, we still rule out a running time of $O(n^{\alpha+\beta-\varepsilon})$. This finishes the proof. \blacktriangleleft

Finally, we also show that Colored Walk is equivalent to a formulation without given source and target nodes $s, t \in V$, specifically, the variant in which we are looking for *any* walk in G with the prescribed color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ . We call these formulations DIRECTED/UNDIRECTED Σ -EDGE-COLORED/ Σ -NODE-COLORED ANYWALK.

Below, we prove a $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving equivalence of Undirected Edge-Colored Walk and Undirected Edge-Colored AnyWalk (up to an additive constant in the alphabet size); the proof of equivalence for all directed and/or node-colored variants is analogous (and in fact simpler).

► **Lemma 20** (Equivalence of s - t -version and any-walk version).

1. *Undirected Edge-2-Colored Walk* $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ *Undirected Edge-4-Colored AnyWalk*
2. *Undirected Edge- σ -Colored AnyWalk* $\leq_{\{n, m, \ell\}}$ *Undirected Edge- $(\sigma + 1)$ -Colored Walk*

Proof. For 1, consider any Undirected Edge-2-Colored Walk instance $G = (V, E)$, $s, t \in V$ and $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in \{1, 2\}$. We construct a graph G' from G by adding two nodes s', t' , connecting s' to s by an edge labeled 3 and connecting t to t' by an edge labeled 4. Note that any walk in G' with color sequence $3, c_1, \dots, c_\ell, 4$ must start in s' , transition to s , use a walk from s to t in G with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ , and finally transition to t' . Thus, G' with color sequence $3, c_1, \dots, c_\ell, 4$ yields an equivalent Undirected 4-Edge-Colored AnyWalk instance. The reduction is clearly $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving.

For 2, consider any Undirected Edge-2-Colored AnyWalk instance $G = (V, E)$, $c_1, \dots, c_\ell \in [\sigma]$. We construct G' from G by adding two nodes $s', t' \in V$, connecting s' to each node $v \in V$ by an edge labeled $\sigma + 1$, as well as connecting each node $v \in V$ to t' by an edge labeled $\sigma + 1$. Note that there is a walk from s' to t' in G with color sequence $(\sigma + 1), c_1, \dots, c_\ell, (\sigma + 1)$ if and only if there is any walk in G with color sequence c_1, \dots, c_ℓ . Thus, we have obtained an equivalent Undirected Edge- $(\sigma + 1)$ -Colored Walk instance. Since we have added only two nodes, $O(n) = O(m)$ edges and two colors to the color sequence, the reduction is $\{n, m, \ell\}$ -preserving. \blacktriangleleft

We obtain in particular that the NFA Acceptance hypothesis is equivalent to the $(m\ell)^{1-o(1)}$ barrier for Directed/Undirected Edge-4-Colored/Node-4-Colored AnyWalk.

7 Conclusion

In this work, we have posed the NFA Acceptance hypothesis, discussed implications of a proof or refutation and considered its connections to standard assumptions in fine-grained complexity theory. At the very least, the NFA Acceptance hypothesis should be understood as a technical challenge towards progress for many interesting problems. Specifically, without refuting it, we cannot expect:

- Context-Free Language Reachability in time $O(n^{3-\epsilon})$,
- the Word Break problem in time $O(m + nm^{1/3-\epsilon})$,
- approximating the Viterbi path in time $O((m\ell)^{1-\epsilon})$,
- pattern matching in string-labeled graphs in time $O((m\ell)^{1-\epsilon})$,
- regular path queries in graph databases in time $O((|q| \cdot m)^{1-\epsilon})$, and
- polynomial improvements for any data structure problems and dynamic problems with tight OMv-hardness, including problems from graph algorithms [32, 25, 4, 33], string algorithms [22, 38, 21], computational geometry [26, 42], linear algebra [59, 36], formal languages [30], and database theory [13, 16, 37].

We leave the following open problems:

- Refute the NFA Acceptance hypothesis or prove that it is implied by any standard fine-grained hypothesis.
- Prove an equivalence of NFA Acceptance and Directed n^γ -Edge-Colored Walk for any $\gamma > 0$, ideally for all $0 < \gamma \leq 2$.
- Prove an equivalence of NFA Acceptance with and without ε -transitions for densities $m = \Theta(n^\alpha)$ with $1 \leq \alpha < 2$.

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