

Nondegenerate curves of low genus over small finite fields

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ABSTRACT. In a previous paper, we proved that over a finite field k of sufficiently large cardinality, all curves of genus at most 3 over k can be modeled by a bivariate Laurent polynomial that is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope. In this paper, we prove that there are exactly two curves of genus at most 3 over a finite field that are *not* nondegenerate, one over \mathbb{F}_2 and one over \mathbb{F}_3 . Both of these curves have extremal properties concerning the number of rational points over various extension fields.

Let k be a perfect field with algebraic closure \bar{k} . To a Laurent polynomial $f = \sum_{(i,j) \in \mathbb{Z}^2} c_{ij} x^i y^j \in k[x^{\pm 1}, y^{\pm 1}]$, we associate its Newton polytope $\Delta(f)$, the convex hull in \mathbb{R}^2 of the points $(i, j) \in \mathbb{Z}^2$ for which $c_{ij} \neq 0$. An irreducible Laurent polynomial f is called *nondegenerate* with respect to its Newton polytope if for all faces $\tau \subset \Delta(f)$ (vertices, edges, and $\Delta(f)$ itself), the system of equations

$$(*) \quad f|_{\tau} = x \frac{\partial f|_{\tau}}{\partial x} = y \frac{\partial f|_{\tau}}{\partial y} = 0$$

has no solution in \bar{k}^{*2} , where $f|_{\tau} = \sum_{(i,j) \in \mathbb{Z}^2 \cap \tau} c_{ij} x^i y^j$.

A curve C over k is called *nondegenerate* if it is birationally equivalent over k to a curve defined by a Laurent polynomial $f \in k[x^{\pm 1}, y^{\pm 1}]$ that is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope. For such a curve, a vast amount of geometric information is encoded in the combinatorics of $\Delta(f)$. For example, the (geometric) genus of C is equal to the number lattice points (points in \mathbb{Z}^2) lying in the interior of $\Delta(f)$. Owing to this connection, nondegenerate curves have become popular objects of study in explicit algebraic geometry. (See e.g. Batyrev [1] and the introduction in our preceding work [5] for further background and discussion.)

In a previous paper [5], we gave a partial answer to the natural question: *Which curves are nondegenerate?*

THEOREM. *Let C be a curve of genus g over k . Suppose that one of these conditions holds:*

- (i) $g = 0$;
- (ii) $g = 1$, and $C(k) \neq \emptyset$;

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- (iii) $g = 2, 3$, and either $17 \leq \#k < \infty$, or $\#k = \infty$ and $C(k) \neq \emptyset$;
- (iv) $g = 4$, and $k = \bar{k}$.

Then C is nondegenerate.

If $g \geq 5$, then the locus $\mathcal{M}_g^{\text{nd}}$ of nondegenerate curves inside the coarse moduli space of curves of genus g satisfies $\dim \mathcal{M}_g^{\text{nd}} = 2g + 1$, except for $g = 7$ where $\dim \mathcal{M}_7^{\text{nd}} = 16$. In particular, a generic curve of genus g is nondegenerate if and only if $g \leq 4$.

Throughout the rest of this article, we assume that k is a finite field, and we consider the cases excluded in condition (iii) above by the condition that $\#k \geq 17$. Based on a number of preliminary experiments, we guessed [5, Remark 7.2] that this condition is superfluous. In truth we have the following theorem, which constitutes the main result of this paper.

THEOREM. *Let C be a curve of genus $g \leq 3$ over a finite field k . Then C is nondegenerate unless $k = \mathbb{F}_2$ or $k = \mathbb{F}_3$, and C is birational to*

$$\begin{aligned} C_2: (x+y)^4 &= (xy)^2 + xy(x+y+1) + (x+y+1)^2 \text{ over } \mathbb{F}_2, \\ C_3: y^3 - y &= (x^2 + 1)^2 \text{ over } \mathbb{F}_3, \end{aligned}$$

respectively.

Both C_2 and C_3 have genus 3. In particular, all curves of genus 2 are nondegenerate.

Intriguingly, C_2 and C_3 have other remarkable properties: they obtain an extremal number of rational points over certain extension fields of \mathbb{F}_2 and \mathbb{F}_3 , respectively.

The paper is organized into four sections. In Sections 1–2, we refine the bound on $\#k$ which guarantees that a curve of genus 2 or 3 over k is nondegenerate. In Section 3, we perform an exhaustive computation using the computer algebra system **Magma** [3] to reduce the bound further. At the same time, we search the remaining finite fields \mathbb{F}_2 and \mathbb{F}_3 for curves that are not nondegenerate. We conclude by discussing the extremal properties of the two resulting curves in Section 4.

1. Refining the bound for hyperelliptic curves

If $\text{char } k$ is odd, then any hyperelliptic curve over k is easily seen to be nondegenerate. Indeed, it is well-known that a hyperelliptic curve of genus g is birationally equivalent over k to an affine curve of the form $y^2 = p(x)$, where $p(x) \in k[x]$ is a squarefree polynomial of degree $2g + 1$ or $2g + 2$. Then directly from the definition (*), one sees that the polynomial $f(x, y) = y^2 - p(x)$ is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope.

If instead $\text{char } k = 2$, then a hyperelliptic curve of genus g has an affine model of the more general form

$$(1.1) \quad y^2 + r(x)y = p(x)$$

with $r(x) \in k[x]$ of degree at most $g + 1$, and $p(x) \in k[x]$ of degree at most $2g + 2$, and at least $2g + 1$ if $\deg r(x) < g + 1$ (see Enge [7, Theorem 7]). Moreover, such a model will not have any singularities in the affine plane; however, this condition is not enough to ensure that the defining polynomial $f(x, y) = y^2 + r(x)y + p(x)$ is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope.

REMARK 1.1. There is a small erratum in our previous paper [5, Section 5]. We write that one can always take $2 \deg r(x) \leq \deg p(x)$ and $\deg p(x) \in \{2g + 1, 2g + 2\}$

in (1.1). This might however fail if $k = \mathbb{F}_2$ and the hyperelliptic curve C has the property that the degree 2 morphism $\pi : C \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^1$ is *completely split* over k , i.e., there are two distinct points in $C(k)$ above each point $0, 1, \infty \in \mathbb{P}^1(k)$. This erratum has no effect on any further statement in the paper [5].

The main result of this section is as follows.

PROPOSITION 1.2. *Let C be a hyperelliptic curve of geometric genus $g \geq 2$ over a finite field k . If $\#k$ is odd or $\#k \geq g + 4$, then C is nondegenerate.*

PROOF. Let $\#k = q$. By the above, we may assume that $q \geq 8$ is even and that C is given by an equation of type (1.1). Let $f(x, y) = y^2 + r(x)y + p(x)$.

First, we claim that after applying a birational transformation we may assume that $r(x)$ is a polynomial of degree $g + 1$ with nonzero constant term. Since $q \geq g + 4 > g + 1$, there is an $a \in k$ such that $r(x - a)$ has nonzero constant term, so replacing $x \leftarrow x - a$ we may assume $r(x)$ has nonzero constant term. Then the transformed polynomial

$$f'(x, y) = x^{2g+2}f(1/x, y/x^{g+1}) = y^2 + r'(x)y + p'(x),$$

which corresponds to applying the \mathbb{Z} -affine map

$$(X, Y) \mapsto (2g + 2 - X - (g + 1)Y, Y)$$

to the exponent vectors of $f(x, y)$, has the property that $\deg r'(x) = g + 1$. Making another substitution $x \leftarrow x - b$ then completes the argument.

Then using the definition (*), a short case-by-case analysis of the possible Newton polytopes shows that if $p(x)$ is squarefree, then $f(x, y) = y^2 + r(x)y + p(x)$ is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope. For each $t(x) \in k[x]$ of degree at most $g + 1$, consider the change of variables $y \leftarrow y + t(x)$; then under this transformation we have $p(x) \leftarrow p_t(x) = p(x) + r(x)t(x) + t(x)^2$ and $r(x)$ is unchanged. We use a sieving argument to show that there exists a choice of $t(x)$ such that $p_t(x)$ is squarefree. Note we have q^{g+2} choices for $t(x)$.

Suppose that p_t is not squarefree. Then $p_t(x)$ is divisible by the square of a monic irreducible polynomial $v(x)$ of degree $m \leq g + 1$. But note that if $v^2 \mid p_{t_1}$ and $v^2 \mid p_{t_2}$ for two choices t_1, t_2 , then subtracting we have

$$v^2 \mid (r(t_1 + t_2) + t_1^2 + t_2^2) = (t_1 + t_2)(r + t_1 + t_2).$$

Moreover, if v divides each of these two factors then in fact $v \mid r$.

We are then led to consider two cases. First, suppose that $v \nmid r$. Then either $v^2 \mid (t_1 + t_2)$ or $v^2 \mid (r + t_1 + t_2)$. Let $h = \lfloor (g + 1)/2 \rfloor$. If $m = \deg v \leq h$, then by sieving we conclude that $v^2 \mid p_t$ for at most $2q^{g+1-2m+1} = 2q^{g+2-2m}$ values of t . On the other hand, if $m > h$ then $\deg v^2 > g + 1$ so by sieving we now have $v \mid p_t$ for at most two values of t . Since the number of monic irreducible polynomials of degree m over k is bounded by q^m/m , the number of values of t such that p_t is

divisible by v^2 with $v \nmid r$ is at most

$$\begin{aligned}
& q(2q^{g+2-2}) + \frac{q^2}{2}(2q^{g+2-4}) + \cdots + \frac{q^h}{h}(2q^{g+2-2h}) + 2\frac{q^{h+1}}{h+1} + \cdots + 2\frac{q^{g+1}}{g+1} \\
&= 2\left(q^{g+1} + \frac{q^g}{2} + \cdots + \frac{q^{g+2-h}}{h} + \frac{q^{h+1}}{h+1} + \cdots + \frac{q^{g+1}}{g+1}\right) \\
&= \left(2 + \frac{2}{g+1}\right)q^{g+1} + 2\left(\sum_{i=2}^h \frac{q^{g+2-i}}{i} + \sum_{i=h+1}^g \frac{q^i}{i}\right) \\
&\leq \left(2 + \frac{2}{g+1}\right)q^{g+1} + 2\frac{q^{g+1}-1}{q-1} \quad (\text{note } h \geq 1) \\
&\leq \left(2 + \frac{2}{g+1} + \frac{2}{q-1}\right)q^{g+1}.
\end{aligned}$$

Next, suppose that $v \mid r$. Then in any case $v \mid (t_1 + t_2)$, and hence there are at most $q^{g+1-m+1}$ values of t such that $v^2 \mid p_t$. Since $\deg r \leq g+1$, in the worst case r splits into $g+1$ linear factors over k , and we have at most $(g+1)q^{g+1}$ values of t for which p_t is divisible by v^2 for some $v \mid r$.

Putting these together, we can find a value of $t(x)$ such that $p_t(x)$ is squarefree if

$$q^{g+2} > \left(g + 3 + \frac{2}{g+1} + \frac{2}{q-1}\right)q^{g+1},$$

which holds whenever $q \geq g+4$, since $g \geq 2$ and $q \geq 8$. \square

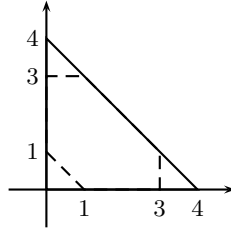
For our genera of interest $g = 2$ and $g = 3$, Proposition 1.2 proves that all hyperelliptic curves are nondegenerate except possibly over \mathbb{F}_2 and \mathbb{F}_4 .

2. Refining the bound for plane quartics

In this section, we refine the bound as in Section 1 but now for plane quartics.

LEMMA 2.1. *Let $C \subset \mathbb{P}^2$ be a nonsingular plane quartic over a finite field k . If $\#k \geq 7$, then C is nondegenerate.*

PROOF. Again analyzing the conditions of nondegeneracy [5, Examples 1.5–1.6], we see that to prove that C is nondegenerate it suffices to find three nonconcurrent k -rational lines in \mathbb{P}^2 which are not tangent to C . The projective transformation which maps the three intersection points to the coordinate points (and the lines to the coordinate lines) realizes C as nondegenerate with respect to a Newton polytope of the following type:



(A dashed line appears as a face if our transformed curve contains the corresponding coordinate point.)

Write $m = \#C(k)$ and $q = \#k$. Since there are $q^2 + q + 1$ lines which are k -rational in \mathbb{P}^2 , and the number of k -rational lines through a fixed point is $q + 1$, it suffices to prove that C has strictly less than q^2 k -rational tangent lines.

We claim that the number of k -rational tangent lines is at most $m + 28$. Of course each point of $C(k)$ determines a tangent line. Suppose a k -rational line is tangent at a point of $C(\bar{k}) \setminus C(k)$; then it is also tangent at each of the Galois conjugates of the point, which since C is defined by a plane quartic immediately implies that the point is defined over a quadratic extension and that the line is a bitangent. By classical geometry and the theory of theta characteristics, there are at most 28 bitangents (see e.g. Ritzenthaler [13, Corollary 1]), and this proves the claim.

Thus if $q^2 > m + 28$, we can find three nonconcurrent nontangent lines. By the Weil bound, it is sufficient that

$$q^2 > q + 1 + 6\sqrt{q} + 28$$

which holds whenever $q \geq 8$. In fact, when $q = 7$ then $m \leq 20$ by a result of Serre [14] (see also Top [15]), and so $q^2 > m + 28$ for all $q \geq 7$. \square

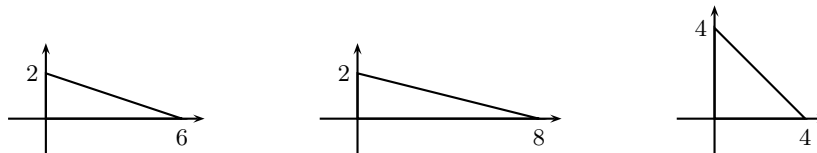
This lemma therefore proves that all plane quartics defined over finite fields are nondegenerate except possibly over \mathbb{F}_q with $q \leq 5$.

3. Computational results

From the results of the previous two sections, in order to prove our main theorem we performed an exhaustive computation in **Magma** to deal with the remaining cases:

- (1a) hyperelliptic curves of genus $g = 2$ over \mathbb{F}_2 and \mathbb{F}_4 ;
- (1b) hyperelliptic curves of genus $g = 3$ over \mathbb{F}_2 and \mathbb{F}_4 ;
- (2) nonsingular quartics in \mathbb{P}^2 over $\mathbb{F}_2, \mathbb{F}_3, \mathbb{F}_4$ and \mathbb{F}_5 (genus $g = 3$).

To this end, we essentially enumerated all irreducible polynomials whose Newton polytope is contained in



respectively, regardless of whether they define a curve of genus g or not. For each of these, we checked whether the Newton polytope contained g interior lattice points, since by Baker's inequality [2, Theorem 4.1] an irreducible Laurent polynomial $f \in k[x^{\pm 1}, y^{\pm 1}]$ defines a curve whose (geometric) genus is at most the number of lattice points in the interior of $\Delta(f)$.

The polynomials f that passed this test were then checked for nondegeneracy with respect to the edges of $\Delta(f)$. Checking nondegeneracy with respect to the edges boils down to checking squarefreeness of a number of univariate polynomials of small degree, which can be done very efficiently. The nondegeneracy condition with respect to the vertices of $\Delta(f)$ is automatic. The nondegeneracy condition with respect to $\Delta(f)$ itself is also automatic if f defines a genus g curve (by Baker's inequality), so we can disregard any polynomial for which this condition is not satisfied.

The polynomials f that were *not* nondegenerate with respect to the edges then saw further investigation. First, and only at this stage, we verified that in fact f defines a curve of genus g . Then, repeatedly, we applied a random transformation to f of the following form:

- (1) $(x, y) \leftarrow (x - a, y - h(x))$ for $a \in k$ and $h(x) \in k[x]$ of degree at most $g + 1$ (for hyperelliptic curves);
- (2) a projective linear transformation (for plane quartics).

We then again checked the resulting polynomial for nondegeneracy with respect to the edges. Polynomials for which there were 1000 failures in a row were stored in a list.

In each of the hyperelliptic curve cases the list remained empty, implying the following lemma.

LEMMA 3.1. *All hyperelliptic curves of genus at most 3 defined over a finite field are nondegenerate.*

In the plane quartic case, the list eventually contained exactly one polynomial for $k = \mathbb{F}_2$:

$$f_2 : (x + y)^4 + (xy)^2 + xy(x + y + 1) + (x + y + 1)^2.$$

We then tried *all* projective linear transformations in $\mathrm{PGL}_3(\mathbb{F}_2)$ and found that, quite remarkably, f_2 is invariant under each of these transformations—the canonical embedding here is truly canonical! Let C_2 denote the complete nonsingular model of the curve defined by f_2 .

Over $k = \mathbb{F}_3$, we were left with a set of polynomials that turned out to be all projectively equivalent to the polynomial

$$f_3 = y^3 - y - (x^2 + 1)^2.$$

We exhaustively verified that none of the projectively equivalent polynomials is nondegenerate with respect to its Newton polytope. Let C_3 denote the complete nonsingular model of the curve defined by f_3 .

Over \mathbb{F}_4 and \mathbb{F}_5 , the list remained empty. We therefore have the following proposition.

PROPOSITION 3.2. *Over any finite field k , all curves C/k of genus at most 3 are nondegenerate, except if $k = \mathbb{F}_2$ and C is k -birationally equivalent to C_2 , or if $k = \mathbb{F}_3$ and C is k -birationally equivalent to C_3 .*

PROOF. It remains to show that if C is a nonhyperelliptic curve of genus 3 which can be modeled by a nondegenerate Laurent polynomial f , then it can be modeled by a nondegenerate Laurent polynomial whose Newton polytope is contained in 4Σ , the convex hull of the points $(0, 0)$, $(0, 4)$, and $(4, 0)$. This is true because $\Delta(f)$ has three interior lattice points which are not collinear, since C is not hyperelliptic [5, Lemma 5.1]. Applying a \mathbb{Z} -affine transformation to the exponent vectors, we may assume that in fact the interior lattice points of $\Delta(f)$ are $(1, 1)$, $(1, 2)$, and $(2, 1)$. But then $\Delta(f)$ is contained in the maximal polytope with these interior lattice points, which is 4Σ [5, Lemma 10.2]. The result follows. \square

We briefly comment on the total complexity of the above computation. Since we are only interested in curves up to birational equivalence, rather than simply enumerating all polynomials of a given form one could instead enumerate curves

by their moduli. Questions of this type in low genus have been pursued by many authors: Cardona, Nart, and Pujolàs [4] and Espinosa García, Hernández Encinas, and Muñoz Masqué [8] study genus 2; Nart and Sadornil [12] study hyperelliptic curves of genus 3; Nart and Ritzenthaler [11] study nonhyperelliptic curves of genus 3 over fields of even characteristic; and Nart [10] gives a closed formula for the number of hyperelliptic curves in odd characteristic. In this paper we used a more naive approach since it is more transparent, easier to implement, and at the same time still feasible. We did however make use of the following speed-ups. For hyperelliptic curves of genus $g = 3$ with $\#k = 4$, the coefficient of x^8 and the constant term can always be taken 1; for plane quartics with $\#k = 4$, the coefficients of x^4 and y^4 and the constant term can always be taken 1. Finally, for plane quartics with $\#k = 5$, from the proof of Lemma 2.1, we may assume that there exist at least two k -rational tangent lines that are only tangent over \bar{k} (otherwise there exist enough nontangent lines to ensure nondegeneracy); transforming these to x - and y -axis, we may thus assume that $f(x, 0) = (ax^2 + bx + 1)^2$ and $f(0, y) = (cy^2 + dy + 1)^2$ with $a, b, c, d \in k$.

We conclude this section with the following question: does there exist a hyperelliptic curve which is not nondegenerate, at all (i.e. of any genus, over any perfect field)?

4. Extremal properties

The curve C_2 can be found in many places in the existing literature. It enjoys some remarkable properties concerning the number $\#C_2(\mathbb{F}_{2^m})$ of \mathbb{F}_{2^m} -rational points for various values of m . First, it has no \mathbb{F}_2 -rational points. However, over \mathbb{F}_4 and \mathbb{F}_8 it has 14 and 24 points, respectively; in both cases, this is the maximal number of rational points possible on a complete nonsingular genus 3 curve, and in each case C_2 is the unique curve obtaining this bound (up to isomorphism). However, over \mathbb{F}_{32} the curve becomes pointless again! And once more, it is the unique curve having this property. For the details, see Elkies [6, Section 3.3]. We refer to work of Howe, Lauter, and Top [9, Section 4] for more on pointless curves of genus 3. It is remarkable that this curve is also distinguished by considering conditions of nondegeneracy.

In fact, C_2 is a twist of the reduction modulo 2 of the Klein quartic (defined by the equation $x^3y + y^3z + z^3x = 0$), which has more extremal properties. For instance, Elkies [6, Section 3.3] has shown that the Klein quartic modulo 3 is extremal over fields of the form \mathbb{F}_{9^m} . If m is odd, its number of points is maximal. If m is even, its number of points is minimal. Although the curve C_3 is not isomorphic over $\overline{\mathbb{F}}_3$ to the Klein quartic, over \mathbb{F}_{27} it has the same characteristic polynomial of Frobenius, being $(T^2 + 27)^3$. It follows that C_3 shares the extremal properties of the Klein quartic over fields of the form \mathbb{F}_{3^m} : C_3 has the maximal number of points possible if m is odd, and the minimal number of points possible if m is even.

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