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# The sum-of-digits function on arithmetic progressions

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Let  $s_2$  be the sum-of-digits function in base 2, which returns the number of nonzero binary digits of a nonnegative integer  $n$ . We study  $s_2$  along arithmetic subsequences and show that — up to a shift — the set of  $m$ -tuples of integers that appear as an arithmetic subsequence of  $s_2$  has full complexity.

## 1. Results

The binary sum-of-digits function  $s_2$  is an elementary object studied in number theory. It is defined by the equation

$$s_2(\varepsilon_\nu 2^\nu + \cdots + \varepsilon_0 2^0) = \varepsilon_\nu + \cdots + \varepsilon_0,$$

where  $\varepsilon_i \in \{0, 1\}$  for  $0 \leq i \leq \nu$ . Despite the simplicity of definition, the behaviour of  $s_2$  on arithmetic progressions is not fully understood. Cusick’s conjecture on the sum-of-digits function [Drmota et al. 2016; Spiegelhofer 2019] concerns this area of research: for an integer  $t \geq 0$ , we define the limit

$$c_t = \lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{N} |\{n : 0 \leq n < N, s_2(n+t) \geq s_2(n)\}|.$$

(The limit exists; see for example [Bésineau 1972]. In fact, the set in this definition is periodic with period  $2^k$  for some  $k$ .) Cusick’s conjecture states that

$$c_t > \frac{1}{2} \tag{1-1}$$

for all  $t \geq 0$ . Drmota, Kauers, and the first author [Drmota et al. 2016] proved that  $c_t > \frac{1}{2}$  for *almost all*  $t$  in the sense of asymptotic density; we also wish to note [Emme and Prikhod’ko 2017; Emme and Hubert 2018; 2019], and the recent partial result [Spiegelhofer 2019].

For  $t \geq 0$  and  $k \in \mathbb{Z}$ , we consider the quantity

$$\delta(k, t) = \lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{N} |\{n : 0 \leq n < N, s_2(n+t) - s_2(n) = k\}|$$

(as was the case for  $c_t$ , this asymptotic density exists [Bésineau 1972]). The family  $\delta(\cdot, t)$  defines a probability distribution with mean 0. Clearly, Cusick’s conjecture states that

$$\delta(0, t) + \delta(1, t) + \cdots > \frac{1}{2}. \tag{1-2}$$

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Numerical computation, using the recurrence for the values  $\delta(k, t)$  presented below, reveals that indeed  $c_t > \frac{1}{2}$  for all  $t < 2^{30}$ . Moreover, since the sum (1-2) involves the summand  $\delta(0, t)$ , and the associated probability distribution is usually close to a normal distribution [Emme and Hubert 2019], the strict inequality  $c_t > \frac{1}{2}$  is plausible. In fact the statement  $\frac{1}{2}\delta(0, t) + \delta(1, t) + \delta(2, t) + \dots > \frac{1}{2}$  is not true in general ( $t = 27$  being the first counterexample); moreover the statement  $\tilde{c}_t \leq \frac{1}{2}$ , where  $\tilde{c}_t = c_t - \delta(0, t)$ , is true for  $t < 2^{30}$  and for almost all  $t$  with respect to asymptotic density [Drmota et al. 2016].

In the current note, motivated by Cusick's conjecture, we are concerned with the  $(m+1)$ -tuple

$$(s_2(n), s_2(n+t), \dots, s_2(n+mt)),$$

where  $t \geq 0$  and  $m \geq 1$  are integers. We aim to understand the set of tuples that can occur, as  $n$  and  $t$  run. In fact, our theorem states that, up to a shift, all tuples occur.

**Theorem 1.1.** *Assume that  $k_1, \dots, k_m \in \mathbb{Z}$ . There exist  $n$  and  $t$  such that for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ ,*

$$k_\ell = s_2(n + \ell t) - s_2(n).$$

This is a generalization of the statement that the Thue–Morse sequence  $\mathbf{t}$  has full *arithmetic complexity*, meaning that every finite word  $\omega \in \{0, 1\}^L$  occurs as an arithmetic subsequence of  $\mathbf{t}$ . This was first proved in [Avgustinovich et al. 2003] and also follows from [Müllner and Spiegelhofer 2017; Konieczny 2019]. Our theorem should be compared to the results proved in [Sanna 2012], who considered pairwise different values of  $s_2(n+0t), \dots, s_2(n+\ell t)$ .

Theorem 1.1 is not hard to prove for  $m = 1$ . We present three arguments leading to this fact:

(1) Assume first that  $k \geq 0$ . Set  $n = 2^{k+1}$  and  $t = 2^k - 1$ . Then  $s_2(n+t) = k+1$  and  $s_2(n) = 1$ , yielding  $k = s_2(n+t) - s_2(n)$ . If  $k < 0$ , we set  $n = 2^{-k+1} - 1$  and  $t = 1$ . Then  $s_2(n) = -k+1$  and  $s_2(n+t) = 1$ , which yields  $s_2(n+t) - s_2(n) = k$ .

Alternatively, we may also write, as in the case  $m = 2$  presented below,  $t = 2^c - 1$  and  $n = 2^{c-1}(2^a - 1)$  for positive integers  $a$  and  $c$ . We obtain  $s_2(n+t) = c$  and  $s_2(n) = a$ , and clearly the difference  $c - a$  runs through all integers.

(2) We have  $s_2(n+1) - s_2(n) = 1 - v_2(n+1) \leq 1$ , where  $v_2(m) = \max\{k \geq 0 : 2^k \mid m\}$  for  $m \geq 1$  is the 2-adic valuation of  $m$ . This formula follows by considering the number of 1s with which the binary expansion of  $n$  ends. Since  $s_2(2^\ell) = 1$  and  $s_2(2^{\ell+1} - 1) = \ell + 1$ , we obtain the fact that  $s_2(n)$  attains all values in  $\{1, \dots, \ell + 1\}$  as  $n$  varies in  $\{2^\ell, \dots, 2^{\ell+1} - 1\}$ . Let  $k \in \mathbb{Z}$  be given and set  $\ell = 2|k|$ . Choose  $n \in \{2^\ell, \dots, 2^{\ell+1} - 1\}$  such that  $s_2(n) = |k| + 1$  and  $n' \in \{2^{\ell+1}, \dots, 2^{\ell+2} - 1\}$  such that  $s_2(n') = |k| + 1 + k$ . Then  $s_2(n') - s_2(n) = k$ , which implies the statement.

(3) The quantities  $\delta(k, t)$  satisfy the following recurrence [Drmota et al. 2016]:

$$\delta(k, 1) = \begin{cases} 2^{k-2}, & k \leq 1, \\ 0 & \text{otherwise,} \end{cases}$$

$$\delta(k, 2t) = \delta(k, t),$$

$$\delta(k, 2t+1) = \frac{1}{2}\delta(k-1, t) + \frac{1}{2}\delta(k+1, t+1).$$

From this, it is very easy to show that  $\delta(k, t) > 0$  for all  $k \leq s_2(t)$ . For  $k$  given, choose  $t$  in such a way that  $s_2(t) \geq k$ ; the positivity of the density  $\delta(k, t)$  implies that there exists an  $n$  such that  $s_2(n+t) - s_2(n) = k$ .

For  $m = 2$ , it is also possible to obtain the statement by elementary considerations: consider integers  $a, c \geq 1$ ,  $b, d \geq 0$  and choose the integers  $n$  and  $t$  in such a way that the binary expansions look as follows:

$$\begin{array}{r} n : \overbrace{1 \cdots 1}^a 10 \cdots 0 \overbrace{1 \cdots 1}^b 0 \cdots 0 \\ t : \quad \quad \quad \underbrace{11 \cdots 1}_c 0 \cdots 0 \underbrace{1 \cdots 1}_d \end{array}$$

The sums of digits of  $n$ ,  $n + t$ , and  $n + 2t$  respectively are  $a + b$ ,  $b + c + d$ , and  $c + d$  respectively. By varying the variables, we can obtain the statement for all integers  $k_1$  and  $k_2$  such that  $k_2 \leq k_1$ . For the case  $k_1 < k_2$ , we use the following configuration of the integers  $n$  and  $t$ , where  $a, d \geq 1$  and  $c \geq 0$ :

$$\begin{array}{r} n : \quad \quad \quad \overbrace{1 \cdots 1}^a 10 \cdots 0 \\ t : \underbrace{1 \cdots 1}_c 0 \cdots 0 \underbrace{11 \cdots 1}_d \end{array}$$

The sums of digits of  $n$ ,  $n + t$ , and  $n + 2t$  are  $a$ ,  $d$ , and  $c + d$  respectively, and we see that we obtain all pairs  $(k_1, k_2) \in \mathbb{Z}^2$  such that  $k_1 \leq k_2$ .

However, the method quickly experiences difficulties, as multiplication by 3 is not a shift of the binary digits anymore. While we believe that the case  $m = 3$  can be done with some effort, a general principle is not apparent. Therefore we choose a different approach.

We prove [Theorem 1.1](#) by induction on  $m$ , the cases  $m = 1, 2$  having been discussed above. Assume that  $m \geq 3$  and let  $k_1, \dots, k_m \in \mathbb{Z}$  be given. By induction hypothesis, there exist  $t_0$  and  $n_0$  such that

$$k_\ell = s_2(n_0 + \ell t_0) - s_2(n_0 + (\ell - 1)t_0) \quad \text{for } 1 \leq \ell < m.$$

Set

$$k'_m = s_2(n_0 + m t_0) - s_2(n_0 + (m - 1)t_0).$$

We are going to show that we may vary  $k'_m$  by steps of  $\pm 1$ , thus yielding the full statement.

By concatenation of binary expansions, it is sufficient to show the following statement:

There exist  $t_1, n_1$  such that  $s_2(n_1 + \ell t_1) - s_2(n_1 + (\ell - 1)t_1) = 0$  for  $1 \leq \ell < m$   
 and  $s_2(n_1 + m t_1) - s_2(n_1 + (m - 1)t_1) = \pm 1$ . (1-3)

This concatenation is straightforward and summarized in the following lemma, which we will also use again in a moment.

**Lemma 1.2.** *Let  $\ell \geq 1$ ,  $m \geq 1$ ,  $n_0, \dots, n_{k-1}$ , and  $t_0, \dots, t_{k-1}$  be nonnegative integers. There exist nonnegative integers  $n$  and  $t$  such that*

$$s_2(n + \ell t) - s_2(n + (\ell - 1)t) = \sum_{0 \leq j < k} (s_2(n_j + \ell t_j) - s_2(n_j + (\ell - 1)t_j))$$

for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ .

*Proof.* The base case  $k = 1$  is trivial; it is sufficient to prove the statement for  $k = 2$ , the general case following easily from repeated application of this case.

Let  $N$  be so large that  $n_0 + mt_0 < 2^N$ , and set  $n = 2^N n_1 + n_0$  and  $t = 2^N t_1 + t_0$ . Since no carry propagation between the digits below and above  $N$  occurs, we can add up the contribution of the two blocks in order to yield the statement.  $\square$

We reduce the problem further, using this block representation again: choose  $t_j = 1$  for all  $0 \leq j < k$ ; it is sufficient to find a  $k \geq 1$  and nonnegative integers  $n_j$  for  $0 \leq j < k$  such that

$$\sum_{0 \leq j < k} (s_2(n_j + \ell) - s_2(n_j + \ell - 1)) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } 1 \leq \ell < m, \\ \pm 1 & \text{if } \ell = m. \end{cases} \quad (1-4)$$

In order to show (1-4), we use the telescoping sum

$$\sum_{a \leq j < a+2^L} g(j) = s_2(a + 2^L) - s_2(a) = g\left(\left\lfloor \frac{a}{2^L} \right\rfloor\right),$$

where  $g(j) = s_2(j + 1) - s_2(j)$ . This representation yields for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ , where  $L$  is chosen such that  $2^L \leq m < 2^{L+1}$ ,

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{2 \cdot 2^L - m + \ell \leq j < 3 \cdot 2^L - m + \ell} g(j) &= g\left(2 + \left\lfloor \frac{-m + \ell}{2^L} \right\rfloor\right) = \begin{cases} g(1) = 0 & \text{if } 1 \leq \ell < m, \\ g(2) = 1 & \text{if } \ell = m, \end{cases} \\ \sum_{2^L - m + \ell \leq j < 2 \cdot 2^L - m + \ell} g(j) &= g\left(1 + \left\lfloor \frac{-m + \ell}{2^L} \right\rfloor\right) = \begin{cases} g(0) = 1 & \text{if } 1 \leq \ell < m, \\ g(1) = 0 & \text{if } \ell = m, \end{cases} \\ \sum_{3 \cdot 2^{L+1} + \ell \leq j < 4 \cdot 2^{L+1} + \ell} g(j) &= g(3) = -1 \quad \text{for } 1 \leq \ell \leq m. \end{aligned}$$

The first of these three identities yields the “+”-part of (1-4) by choosing  $k = 2^L$  and  $n_j = 2 \cdot 2^L - m + j$  for  $0 \leq j < k$ .

The “-”-part is obtained from the second and third identities: by considering the disjoint union  $J = [2^L - m, 2 \cdot 2^L - m) \cup [3 \cdot 2^{L+1}, 4 \cdot 2^{L+1})$ , we have

$$\sum_{j \in J} (s_2(j + \ell) - s_2(j + \ell - 1)) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } 1 \leq \ell < m, \\ -1 & \text{if } \ell = m. \end{cases}$$

The statement follows by merging the two intervals and choosing  $n_j$  accordingly. This finishes the proof of our theorem.

## 2. Possible extensions

From our proof, it is possible to effectively construct integers  $n$  and  $t$  such that  $s_2(n + \ell t) - s_2(n) = k_\ell$  for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ . In particular, this yields integers  $n$  and  $t$  such that  $t_{n+\ell t} = \omega_\ell$  for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ , where  $(\omega_1, \dots, \omega_m) \in \{0, 1\}^m$  and  $t$  is the Thue–Morse sequence on  $\{0, 1\}$ . (Note that we also used  $t(2^\lambda + n) = 1 - t(n)$  for  $n < 2^\lambda$ .) This gives a constructive result concerning the problem of full arithmetic complexity of the Thue–Morse sequence considered in [Avgustinovich et al. 2003; Konieczny 2019; Müllner and Spiegelhofer 2017].

As an extension of the presented line of research, we are interested in the proportion of cases in which  $s_2(n + \ell t) - s_2(n) = k_\ell$  occurs (for  $1 \leq \ell \leq m$ ). For this, we define more generally

$$\delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t) = \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s_2(n + \ell t + \varepsilon_\ell) - s_2(n) = k_\ell \text{ for } 1 \leq \ell \leq m\},$$

where  $\mathbf{k} = (k_1, \dots, k_m) \in \mathbb{Z}^m$  and  $\boldsymbol{\varepsilon} = (\varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_m) \in \mathbb{N}^m$ . This generalizes the array  $\delta$  defined before. As in the one-dimensional case, the densities in this definition actually exist, and they satisfy the following recurrence relation:

$$\delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, 2t) = \frac{1}{2}\delta(\mathbf{k}', \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}', t) + \frac{1}{2}\delta(\mathbf{k}'', \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}'', t),$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} k'_\ell &= k_\ell - (\varepsilon_\ell \bmod 2), & \varepsilon'_\ell &= \lfloor \tfrac{1}{2}\varepsilon_\ell \rfloor, \\ k''_\ell &= k_\ell + 1 - ((\varepsilon_\ell + 1) \bmod 2), & \varepsilon''_\ell &= \lfloor \tfrac{1}{2}(\varepsilon_\ell + 1) \rfloor; \end{aligned}$$

moreover,

$$\delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, 2t + 1) = \frac{1}{2}\delta(\mathbf{k}', \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}', t) + \frac{1}{2}\delta(\mathbf{k}'', \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}'', t),$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} k'_\ell &= k_\ell - ((\varepsilon_\ell + \ell) \bmod 2), & \varepsilon'_\ell &= \lfloor \tfrac{1}{2}(\varepsilon_\ell + \ell) \rfloor, \\ k''_\ell &= k_\ell + 1 - ((\varepsilon_\ell + \ell + 1) \bmod 2), & \varepsilon''_\ell &= \lfloor \tfrac{1}{2}(\varepsilon_\ell + \ell + 1) \rfloor. \end{aligned}$$

This recurrence is the reason for the introduction of  $\boldsymbol{\varepsilon}$  in the definition of  $\delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t)$ . To our knowledge, these identities are new; we give the idea of proof. We have

$$\begin{aligned} \delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, 2t) &= \frac{1}{2} \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s(2n + 2\ell t + \varepsilon_\ell) - s(2n) = k_\ell \text{ for } 1 \leq \ell \leq m\} \\ &\quad + \frac{1}{2} \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s(2n + 2\ell t + \varepsilon_\ell + 1) - s(2n + 1) = k_\ell \text{ for } 1 \leq \ell \leq m\}, \end{aligned}$$

and using the identities  $s(2n) = s(n)$  and  $s(2n + 1) = s(n) + 1$ , we obtain

$$s(2n + 2\ell t + \varepsilon_\ell) = s(2(n + \ell t + \lfloor \tfrac{1}{2}\varepsilon_\ell \rfloor) + (\varepsilon_\ell \bmod 2)) = s(n + \ell t + \varepsilon'_\ell) + (\varepsilon_\ell \bmod 2);$$

therefore  $s(2n + 2\ell t + \varepsilon_\ell) - s(2n) = k_\ell$  is equivalent to  $s(n + \ell t + \varepsilon'_\ell) - s(n) = k'_\ell$ . Analogous computations are valid for  $\varepsilon_\ell$  replaced by  $\varepsilon_\ell + 1$ ,  $\varepsilon_\ell + \ell$ , and  $\varepsilon_\ell + \ell + 1$  respectively, which yields the claim.

This recurrence can be used to prove statements on the densities  $\delta(\mathbf{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t)$ . The general intuitive idea is that the differences  $s(n + jt) - s(n)$ , for  $1 \leq j \leq m$ , should be *almost independent for most  $t$* ; in light of this consideration, we consider generalizations of Cusick's conjecture and of the result of [Emme and Hubert 2019]. On the one hand, we may ask for multidimensional generalizations of (1-1), relating the relative sizes of the values  $s_2(n)$ ,  $s_2(n + t)$ ,  $\dots$ ,  $s_2(n + mt)$  to one another. We propose the following conjecture, extending (1-1).

**Conjecture 1.** Assume that  $m \geq 1$  is an integer. For an integer  $t \geq 0$ , define

$$c_t^{(m)} = \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s(n) \leq s(n + jt) \text{ for } 1 \leq j \leq m\}.$$

Then for all  $t \geq 0$ ,

$$c_t^{(m)} > \frac{1}{2^m}.$$

The statement is wrong for any larger constant in place of  $1/2^m$ . Also, define

$$C_t^{(m)} = \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s(n) \leq s(n + t) \leq s(n + 2t) \leq \dots \leq s(n + mt)\}.$$

Then for all  $t \geq 0$ ,

$$C_t^{(m)} > \frac{1}{2^m m!}.$$

The constant  $1/(2^m m!)$  is maximal.

On the other hand, we could ask for the overall shape of the  $m$ -dimensional probability distribution defined by  $\delta(\cdot, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t)$ .

**Problem 1.** Prove a multidimensional generalization of the theorem in [Emme and Hubert 2019]: for most  $t$ , the densities  $\text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s_2(n + \ell t) - s_2(n) = k_\ell \text{ for } 1 \leq \ell \leq m\}$  should define a probability distribution that is close to a multivariate Gaussian law.

We can now understand the intuition behind the constants in [Conjecture 1](#): a bivariate normal distribution with mean  $(0, 0)$  has one quarter of its total weight in the quadrant  $\{(x, y) \in \mathbb{R}^2 : 0 \leq x, 0 \leq y\}$ , and analogous considerations hold for higher dimensions. Concerning the values  $C_t^{(2)}$ , a bivariate normal distribution with mean  $(0, 0)$  has one *eighth* of its total weight in the octant  $\{(x, y) \in \mathbb{R}^2 : 0 \leq x \leq y\}$ , which corresponds to the complex closed region  $\{re^{2\pi i x} : r \geq 0, \frac{1}{8} \leq x \leq \frac{1}{4}\}$ . Noting the fact that  $s(n + 2t) \geq s(n + t)$  if and only if  $s(n + 2t) - s(n) \geq s(n + t) - s(n)$ , we see the link between the densities  $\delta(\boldsymbol{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t)$  with  $\boldsymbol{k}$  lying in this octant and the values  $C_t^{(2)}$ . Concerning higher dimensions, we note that the  $m!$  sets

$$\{x \in \mathbb{R}^m : \|x\| \leq 1, 0 \leq x_{\sigma(1)} \leq x_{\sigma(2)} \leq \dots \leq x_{\sigma(m)}\},$$

where  $\sigma$  is a permutation of  $\{1, \dots, m\}$ , are unions of line segments  $[0, z]$ , where  $\|z\| = 1$ ; they are pairwise congruent (using a linear transformation that is a permutation matrix in the canonical base); an intersection of two distinct sets of this form has measure zero, and their union makes up a fraction  $1/2^m$  of the unit ball in  $m$  dimensions.

We implemented the computation of the densities  $\delta(\boldsymbol{k}, \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}, t)$  for two dimensions in the Sage computer algebra system [SageMath 2017], and the resulting Sage worksheet is available from the website of Spiegelhofer.<sup>1</sup> We obtain

$$c_t^{(2)} \geq c_{951}^{(2)} = \frac{94299}{262144} = 0.3597\dots > \frac{1}{4} \quad \text{for } t \leq 2^{10}$$

and

$$C_t^{(2)} \geq c_{991}^{(2)} = \frac{43947}{262144} = 0.1676\dots > \frac{1}{8} \quad \text{for } t \leq 2^{10}.$$

The implementation involves nine two-dimensional arrays of rational numbers (corresponding to the nine possibilities  $(\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2) \in \{0, 1, 2\}^2$ ) and each of these calculations took about 5 minutes on a standard machine. We note that we did not optimize the Sage code, and certainly this computation can be sped up significantly.

Other conjectures similar to [Conjecture 1](#) are conceivable: what about the other octants and quadrants  $A$  in the plane (including the borders)? Is it always true that  $\frac{1}{8}$ , resp.  $\frac{1}{4}$ , is a lower bound for the density  $\text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : (s(n + t) - s(n), s(n + 2t) - s(n)) \in A\}$ ? We leave this question open for future discussion, but we note that the analogous problem in one dimension is true for almost all  $t$ : we also have

$$\tilde{c}_t = \text{dens}\{n \in \mathbb{N} : s(n + t) \leq s(n)\} > \frac{1}{2}$$

<sup>1</sup><https://dmg.tuwien.ac.at/spiegelhofer/>

for  $t$  in a set having asymptotic density 1 [Drmota et al. 2016]. In other words, usually the median of the probability distribution defined by  $\delta(\cdot, t)$  is very close to the mean value (which is 0). We believe that  $\tilde{c}_t \geq \frac{1}{2}$  is true for all  $t$ , which complements Cusick’s conjecture (1-1) (note that  $\tilde{c}_1 = \frac{1}{2}$ ; thus there is no strict inequality).

We expect that nontrivial statements on both [Conjecture 1](#) and [Problem 1](#), at least for small  $m$ , can be obtained by extending the study of moments set forward in [Emme and Hubert 2019]. This is certainly not easy and will introduce technical difficulties that have to be surmounted.

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LUKAS SPIEGELHOFER:

[lukas.spiegelhofer@tuwien.ac.at](mailto:lukas.spiegelhofer@tuwien.ac.at)

Institute of Discrete Mathematics and Geometry, Vienna University of Technology, Vienna, Austria

THOMAS STOLL:

[thomas.stoll@univ-lorraine.fr](mailto:thomas.stoll@univ-lorraine.fr)

Institut Élie Cartan, Université de Lorraine, Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy, France

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