Triangulating a Nonconvex Polytope

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the problem of partitioning a three-dimensional polytope into a small number of elementary convex parts. The need for such decompositions arises in tool design, computer-aided manufacturing, finite-element methods, and robotics. Our main result is an algorithm for decomposing a polytope with n vertices and r reflex edges into $O(n+r^2)$ tetrahedra. This bound is asymptotically tight in the worst case. The algorithm is simple and practical. Its running time is $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$.

1 Introduction

This work is concerned with the problem of partitioning a polytope in $\Re^3$ into a small number of elementary convex parts. The general problem of decomposing an object into simpler components has been the focus of much attention in recent years. In two dimensions, computer graphics and pattern recognition have been the main source of motivation for this work. Beginning with the papers of Feng and Pavlidis [12] and Schachter [20], the problem of rewriting a simple polygon as a collection of simple parts has been exhaustively researched, cf. O'Rourke's book [17] and the survey article (Chazelle [7]). In higher dimensions, however, results have been few and far between. It is known from (Chazelle [6]) that a polytope of n vertices can always be partitioned into $O(n^2)$ convex pieces and that this bound is tight in the worst case. On a related problem, Aronov and Sharir [1] have shown that the cells of an arrangement of n triangles in 3-space can be partitioned into a total of $O(n^2\alpha(n)+h)$ tetrahedra, where h is the number of faces in the arrangement, and $\alpha(n)$ is the inverse Ackermann function. For fixed arbitrary dimension d, Edelsbrunner et al. [11] have given an optimal algorithm for computing the partition of d-space induced by a collection of hyperplanes. The stratification of real-algebraic varieties and related issues are discussed in [5,8,9,19,21,23].

The specific problem of partitioning a three-dimensional polytope into simple parts arises in mesh-generation for finite-element methods, computer-aided design and manufacturing, automated assembly systems and robotics (Baker [2], Smith [22]). The problem comes under various guises, depending on the desired shape of partitioning elements: convex, simplicial, star-shaped, monotone, rectangular, isothetic, etc. In general, the quest for minimal partitions seems destined to be frustrated. For example, finding minimum convex decompositions is *NP*-hard (Lingas [14]). In practice, however, good approximation algorithms may be just as attractive, especially, if the decomposition is fast, robust, and free of pathological features. Indeed, a minimum partition can be sometimes so contrived that a finer, yet more regular, decomposition is preferable.

How difficult is it to triangulate a polytope (that is, subdivide it into a collection of tetrahedra)? In practice, a "good" triangulation algorithm should not only guarantee $O(n^2)$ pieces in the worst case, but it should also make the size of the triangulation dependent on both n, the size of the polytope, and r, the number of reflex edges. The polytopes arising in standard applications areas tend to be quasi-convex, and this fact should be used to one's advantage. For example, a triangulation of quadratic size would be disastrous if, say, the polytope is convex. When both n and r are taken into account, the lower bound on the triangulation size becomes $\Omega(n + r^2)$ (as is easily derived from [6]). By this criterion, the algorithm described in this paper is optimal: A polytope of n vertices and r reflex edges is triangulated into $O(n + r^2)$ pieces. The running time is $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$. The algorithm is very simple and we believe that it will be practical. Plans are under way to implement it and test it on actual problems arising in the use of finite-element methods in aerospace engineering.

The triangulation algorithm consists of two parts. In a *pop-out phase* we identify vertices of small degree that are not *hindered* by other vertices and remove them one by one, much like we would pull out a ski hat off someone's head. This pruning operation reduces the size of the polytope to $O(r)$. Next, we enter the *fence-off phase*, which involves erecting vertical fences from each edge of the polytope. We use section 2 to set our notation and move a number of technicalities out of the way. Section 3 describes the triangulation algorithm proper.

2 Cups, Crowns, Domes, and Other Widgets

We begin by recalling some standard terminology and introducing some of our own. Let P be a polytope in $\Re^3$. We assume that P is simple, meaning that it is a piecewise-linear 3-manifold with boundary, which is homeomorphic to a closed 3-ball. We also assume that its boundary ∂P is facially structured as a two-dimensional cell complex. Its elements are relatively open sets which are called *vertices*, *edges*, or *facets*, if their affine closures have dimension 0, 1, or 2, respectively. Simplicity rules out handles, dangling or abutting edges (figure 1), but it allows facets to have holes. An edge e of P is said to be *reflex* if the (interior) dihedral angle formed by its two incident facets exceeds π. By extension, we say that a vertex is *reflex* if it is incident upon at least one reflex edge, and that it is *flat* if all its incident facets lie in at most two distinct planes. Finally, a vertex is *pointed* if it is neither flat nor reflex (figure 2). It is easy to see that a pointed vertex cannot be incident upon two collinear edges, although it can be incident upon two coplanar (adjacent) facets of P.

Next, we define the *cone* of a pointed vertex v as the unbounded convex polyhedron spanned by the edges incident upon v. More precisely, $cone(v)$ is the locus of points $v + \sum_{1 \le i \le k} \alpha_i (w_i - v)$, where $w_1, \ldots, w_k$ are the vertices of P adjacent to v and the α_i's are arbitrary nonnegative reals. We are now ready to introduce the key notion of a *cup*. The cone of a pointed vertex v contains a number of vertices of P distinct from v. Some lie on the boundary of the cone; others may lie strictly inside. The cup of v is a portion of the cone which contains v but steers clear of the other vertices. Let K^+ and K be the convex hulls of all the vertices of P lying in $cone(v)$ and $cone(v) \setminus \{v\}$, respectively. We define $cup(v)$ as the simple polytope formed by the closure of $K^+ \setminus K$. If a vertex of P intersects the cup outside the cone's boundary but is *not* a vertex of the cup by virtue of the definition given above, then we make it into one and call it *stranded*. As we shall see below, stranded vertices can only lie on the boundary of the cup and thus sit on facets with or without cup edges incident upon them (figure 3).

A number of simple properties follow readily from the definition. A cup is the closure of the difference between the convex hull of a finite point-set $A \sqcup \{v\}$ and the convex hull of A. Since v does not belong to A, its cup is a simple star-shaped polytope whose kernel contains v (figure 4). Its boundary contains a number of polygons incident upon v which are glued to the convex hull of A. The glueing border can be centrally projected onto a plane so as to appear as the boundary of a convex polygon. The border in question is a closed simple polygonal curve, called the *crown* of v. The crown acts as a Jordan curve on the boundary of the cup, which it separates into one piece on the boundary of the cone and a convex polyhedral patch, which we call the *dome* of v. Edges and vertices of the dome that are not in the crown are called *internal*. Obviously, the internal edges of the dome are the only edges of the cup which are reflex (with respect to the cup). To conclude this string of definitions, we refer to the pointed vertex v as the *apex* of $cup(v)$.

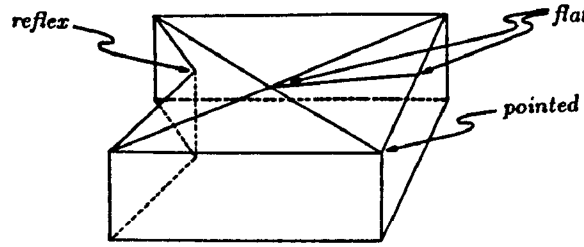

Figure 2: The different types of vertices

We now investigate the relationship between P and the cup of v. All cup vertices are vertices of P though, obviously, the same cannot be said of cup edges. A more interesting observation is that the cup lies inside P. This follows from the fact, to be proven below, that the facets of the cup that are not in the dome lie in ∂P. Thus, it is impossible for a facet or an edge of P to intersect the interior of the cup, unless a vertex of P does. But that, of course, is ruled out by the very definition of a cup. This establishes our claim and also shows that stranded vertices can only be internal vertices of the dome. Let us now prove the premise of this reasoning, which is that a facet of the cup that is not in the dome lies on the boundary ∂P. It suffices to show that the crown lies entirely in ∂P. Let $g_1, \ldots, g_\ell$ be the facets of P incident upon v and let us (mentally) merge any pair of coplanar facets. This produces superfacets $f_1, \ldots, f_k$ (given in either circular order around v), such that the dihedral angle between two adjacent f_i's is strictly less than

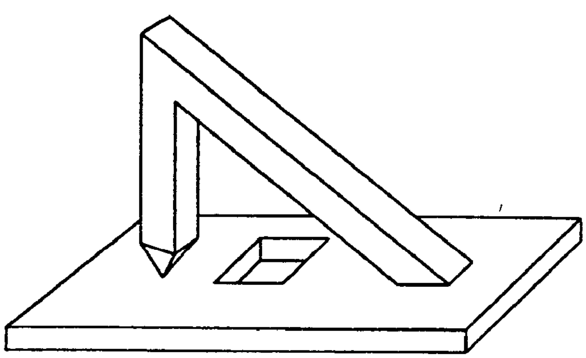

Figure 1: A nonsimple polytope

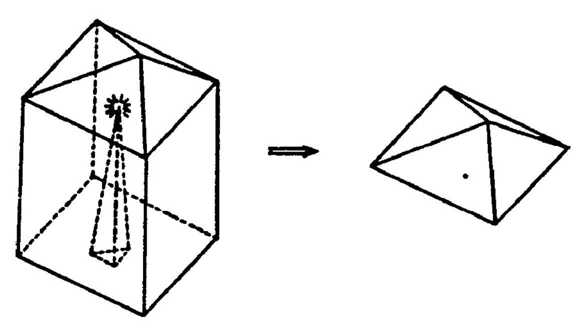

Figure 3: A cup with a stranded vertex

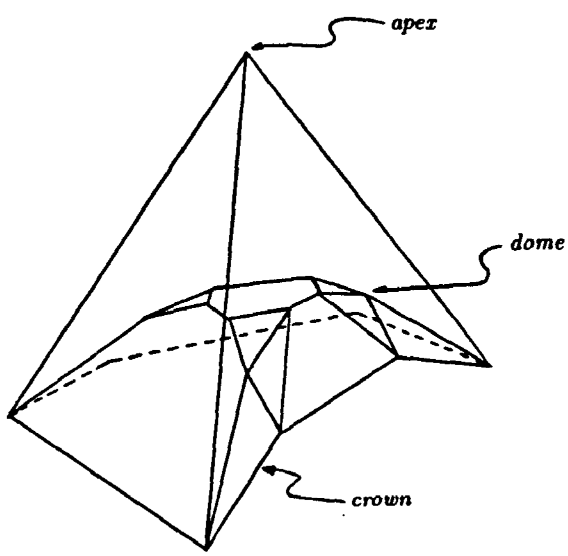

Figure 4: A cup

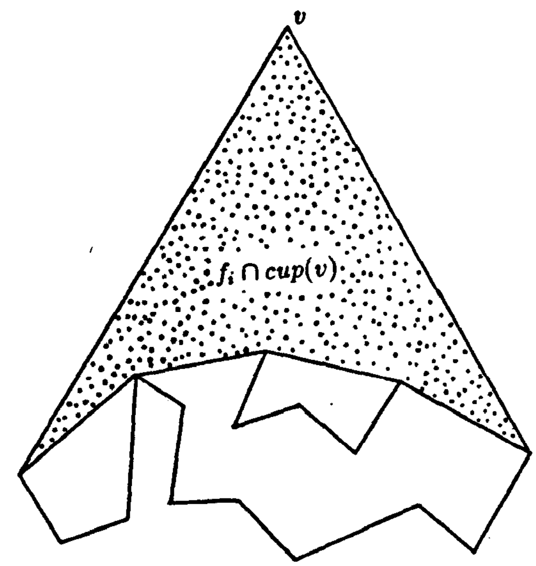

Figure 5: A facet of a cup

π. Now, for each $i = 1, \ldots, k$, let K_i^+ (resp. K_i) be the two-dimensional convex hull of the vertices of P lying in f_i (resp. $f_i \setminus \{v\}$). The closure of $K_i^+ \setminus K_i$ is the polygon formed by intersecting the cup of v with the plane supporting f_i: it is the two-dimensional equivalent of a cup (figure 5). Its boundary consists of a two-edge convex chain followed by a concave chain (possibly reduced to a single edge). By a convex (resp. concave) chain we mean a piece of a polygon's boundary which always turns strictly right (resp. left) when traversed clockwise. The construction works as desired because v is pointed, and therefore exhibits an angle less than π in f_i. The crown of v is the closed curve obtained by concatenating the concave chains in sequence. This proves our claim that the crown lies in ∂P. Additionally, no vertices but the endpoints of such concave chains can be pointed vertices of P. Therefore, since all edges of the cup adjacent to the apex are also edges of P, a pointed vertex can be on the crown of another pointed vertex only if they are adjacent in P. Note however, that the converse is not always true. In particular, if two pointed vertices are connected by an edge which is incident upon two coplanar facets, none of them lies on the crown of the other.

Let us summarize the various types of faces which a cup may have. The following statements are to be understood with respect to the cup and *not* P. The edges incident to the apex as well as the edges of the crown are nonreflex. Actually, none of them can be incident to two coplanar facets. The reason is that the convex hull operation merges coplanar facets. As a result, although each facet of the cup incident upon v lies in ∂P, it does not necessarily lie within any given facet of P. Returning to our classification, we should note that the internal edges of the dome are all reflex.

We close this section with a few technical lemmas which hold the key to understanding the whys and wherefores of the pop-out phase. That phase involves identifying pointed vertices of small degree whose domes are unhindered. We say that a dome is *hindered* if it contains (i) an internal vertex, or (ii) an internal edge that is also an edge of P. As usual, the *degree* of a vertex of P refers to the number of edges incident upon it. The idea is to pull out such a desirable vertex by removing the boundary of its cup and replacing it by its dome. This shelling step decreases the vertex count by one without increasing the number of reflex edges.

In the following, we assume that P is a simple polytope with n vertices and m edges, exactly r of which are reflex. We shall also assume that P does not have any flat vertices.

Lemma 2.1. *Let v and v' be two distinct nonadjacent pointed vertices of a simple polytope. No point can be an internal vertex for the domes of both v and v'. Similarly, no line segment can be an internal edge of both domes.*

Proof: Let z be a vertex internal to the domes of v and v'. Let us first assume that the intersection Q of the interiors of the cups of v and v' is nonempty. The closure of Q must have at least one vertex outside the dome of v, otherwise it would have empty interior. The only such vertex can be the apex v, however, since the interior of a cup is free of vertices. Thus, v lies in the cup of v'. Since it can neither coincide with v' nor be an internal vertex of the dome of v', the vertex v must lie in the crown of v'. But this was mentioned earlier as an impossibility, since v and v' are nonadjacent.

So, we can now assume that the intersection of the interiors of the two cups is empty. Since z is internal to the dome of v, there exists a small open half-ball centered at z that lies entirely within the cup of v. A similar statement holds for v' as well, and since the two half-balls are nonintersecting, the domes of both v and v', locally around z, have to lie on the plane separating the two half-balls, which contradicts the simplicity of P.

This proves the first part of the lemma. The second part is a trivial corollary: simply introduce an artificial vertex at the midpoint of the internal edge. ∎

Lemma 2.2. *Let $d \geq 6$ and $t > 5 + 30/(d-5)$ be two fixed integers. If $m \geq (1+t)r$ then P contains at least $u(m-r)+2$ pointed vertices of degree at most d, where*

$$u = \frac{t-5}{3t} - \frac{2}{d+1}.$$

Proof: We have $n \geq m/3 + 2$, from Euler's relation. If n' is the number of reflex vertices, then the number of pointed vertices is

$$n - n' \geq \frac{m}{3} + 2 - n'.$$

Since each reflex vertex is incident upon at least one reflex edge, we have $n' \leq 2r$. From the last two inequalities, and under the assumption that $m \geq (1+t)r$, we derive

$$n - n' \geq \frac{m}{3} + 2 - 2r \geq \frac{t-5}{3t}(m-r) + 2.$$

Since a pointed vertex is incident upon nonreflex edges only,

$$\sum_i d_i \leq 2(m-r),$$

where the sum of the degrees d_i extends over all pointed vertices. Furthermore,

$$\sum_i d_i \geq \sum_{d_j > d} d_j \geq \left(n - n' - N\right)\left(d+1\right),$$

where N is the number of pointed vertices of degree at most equal to d. The combination of the last two inequalities yields $\left(n - n' - N\right)\left(d+1\right) \leq 2(m-r)$. Therefore,

$$N \geq (n-n') - \frac{2}{d+1}(m-r) \geq \left(\frac{t-5}{3t} - \frac{2}{d+1}\right)(m-r) + 2.$$

Thus, setting $u = (t-5)/(3t) - 2/(d+1) > 0$, the proof is complete. ∎

Lemma 2.3. *Any reflex vertex which is internal to a dome has at least three reflex edges incident upon it.*

Proof: Let w be an internal vertex of the dome of some pointed vertex. There exists a small open half-ball centered at w that lies entirely inside P. Therefore, w is a vertex of the convex hull of the point-set consisting of w and of the endpoints of the edges incident upon it. Note that the convex hull edges incident upon w are also edges of the polytope, and are in fact reflex. From the simplicity of P, we can now conclude that at least three reflex edges of the polytope are incident upon w. ∎

Lemma 2.4. *A reflex vertex of P can contribute internal vertices to at most three distinct domes. Similarly, a reflex edge of P can contribute internal edges to at most three domes.*

Proof: Figure 6 shows that these bounds are tight. Now, suppose, for contradiction, that a reflex vertex p is internal to the domes of four pointed vertices u, v, w, z of P. It follows from Lemma 2.1 that all four apexes must be adjacent to each other, thus forming a tetrahedron T whose six edges all lie in ∂P. This tetrahedron cannot have empty interior, otherwise one of the apexes would be either reflex or flat. Note also that the cup of a pointed vertex s contains any

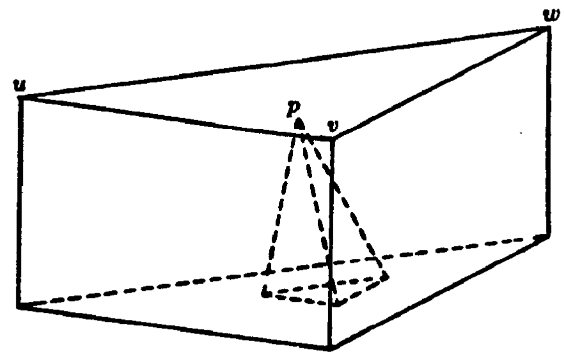

Figure 6: A reflex vertex contributing internal vertices to three domes

vertex t adjacent to s such that the (interior) dihedral angle around st is strictly less than π. Therefore, the crown of each of u, v, w, z contains the other three apexes as vertices. Furthermore, since p is an internal vertex of all four domes, and the edges of T are nonreflex, p must lie in T. However, it cannot lie on any of T's edges, otherwise there would be two nonadjacent apexes.

Since p is internal to the domes of all four apexes, there exists a small ball centered at p that lies entirely in each of their cones. Because P is simple, the ball intersects the complement of P, and so, in particular contains a point q outside of P that avoids each of the six planes defined by p and any two of the four apexes. It follows that p must lie in the relative interior of one of the four tetrahedra defined by q and any three of the apexes. All four vertices of that tetrahedron, however, lie in the cone of the fourth apex, which prevents p from being a vertex of its dome, and gives us a contradiction.

The proof of the second part of the lemma is similar to that of Lemma 2.1. We introduce an artificial reflex vertex at the midpoint of the edge, and make use of the previous result. ∎

Lemma 2.5. *Given an edge pq of P, there are at most two pointed vertices v and w, such that pq is internal to the domes of both v and w, and p and q lie on the crowns of both domes.*

Proof: Suppose that pq is internal to the domes of v, w, z, and that p and q lie in all three crowns. Then, all six line segments pv, qv, pw, qw, pz, qz lie in ∂P, and all three triangles pvq, pwq, pzq lie entirely in P. Since v, w, z are pointed vertices, the boundary of each of these triangles cannot contain more than one of the apexes, and thus a total ordering of them around pq can be established. Furthermore, since the genus of ∂P is 0, these boundaries act as Jordan curves, partitioning ∂P into two polyhedral patches each. Therefore, there is one apex, say v, such that each of the other two apexes w, z belongs to each of the two polyhedral patches delimited by pv, qv, and pq. It follows from Lemma 2.1 that v, w, z must be adjacent to each other, and so the edge wz must cross one of the segments pv, qv, or pq. In the first two cases, p and q, respectively, would be excluded from the

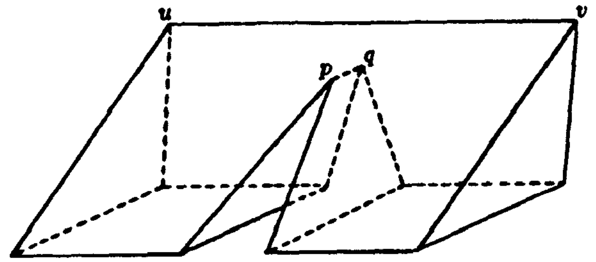

Figure 7: An internal edge with its endpoints on the crowns of two domes

cup of v. In the last case the two facets incident upon pq would be coplanar, which contradicts the fact that pq is a reflex edge. Note that the statement of the lemma is tight, as shown in figure 7. ∎

Lemma 2.6. *The polytope P contains at most $2r$ pointed vertices whose domes are hindered.*

Proof: We partition the reflex edges of P into three classes:

1. those with at least one endpoint being an internal vertex of some dome,
2. internal edges of a dome with both endpoints on the crown, and
3. all remaining reflex edges.

Let us prove by contradiction that classes 1 and 2 are disjoint. Assume that there exists a reflex edge e of P, internal to the domes of two pointed vertices u and v, such that one of its endpoints, say p, lies on the crown of u and is internal to the dome of v. Then, there exists a small open half-ball centered at p that lies entirely in the cup of v, and hence in P. Since e is internal to the dome of u, it is not collinear with pu. With pu nonreflex, it follows that the unique plane defined by e and pu intersects the half-ball in a half-disk centered at p. The internal angle between e and pu is strictly less than π however, therefore the half-disk cannot lie entirely in P: a contradiction. We conclude that no vertex can be internal to the dome of a pointed vertex and on the crown of another one.

Let r_i ($i = 1, 2, 3$) be the cardinality of the i-th class above. According to Lemma 2.4, an edge in class 1 may hinder at most three domes by contributing internal vertices through one given endpoint q (so the total might be as high as 6). Note that if an endpoint of such an edge lies on the crown of some pointed vertex, then, according to the argument above, it cannot be internal to, and thus cannot hinder any dome. But the endpoint q will be incident upon at least two additional reflex edges of P in class 1 (Lemma 2.3). Therefore, the r_1 edges in class 1 can hinder at most $(2 \times 3)/3\ r_1$ domes. Additionally, from Lemma 2.5, each edge in class 2 may hinder at most two domes. The lemma follows readily. ∎

Lemma 2.7. *Let $d \geq 6$ and $t > 11 + 66/(d-5)$ be two fixed integers. If $m \geq (1+t)r$ then P contains at least $s(m-r)$ pointed vertices of degree $\leq d$ whose domes are unhindered, where*

$$s = \frac{t-11}{3t} - \frac{2}{d+1}.$$

Proof: From Lemma 2.2, we derive a lower bound on the number of pointed vertices of degree at most d. Among these vertices, at most $2r$ can have their domes hindered (Lemma 2.6). So, in order to guarantee the presence of pointed vertices with unhindered domes, it suffices to have

$$\left(\frac{t-5}{3t} - \frac{2}{d+1}\right)(m-r) + 2 \geq \frac{2}{t}(m-r) \geq 2r.$$

The number of such vertices will be at least

$$\left(\frac{t-5}{3t} - \frac{2}{d+1} - \frac{2}{t}\right)(m-r) = s(m-r),$$

where $s = (t-11)/(3t) - 2/(d+1) > 0$. ∎

3 The Triangulation Algorithm

Given a simple polytope P with n vertices and r reflex edges, we show how to partition P into $O(n + r^2)$ tetrahedra. The algorithm requires $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$ time and $O(n + r^2)$ space. Up to within a constant factor, the number of tetrahedra produced by the algorithm is optimal in the worst case. This follows from a lower bound of $\Omega(m^2)$ on the number of convex parts needed to partition a certain polytope of m vertices, which is a member of an infinite family $\{P_m\}$ (Chazelle [6]). Indeed, we simply add dummy nonreflex edges to P_r until we have a polytope of n vertices with r reflex edges. Although not all realizable pairs (n, r) might be obtained in this way, enough of them are to justify our claim that $\Theta(n + r^2)$ is a tight worst-case bound on the number of tetrahedra needed to triangulate a polytope with n vertices and r reflex edges.

As we alluded to earlier, the triangulation algorithm consists of two phases, figuratively termed *pop-out* and *fence-off*. We shall assume that the polytope P is free of flat vertices and is given to us in *normal* form, meaning that its boundary is triangulated and that all incidences are explicitly listed. For this purpose, we can use any of the standard polyhedral representations given in the literature, e.g., winged-edge (Baumgart [4]), doubly-connected-edge-list (Muller and Preparata [16]), quad-edge (Guibas and Stolfi [13]). A simple polytope can be normalized very simply in $O(nr)$ time. To do so, we triangulate each facet by sweeping a line across its supporting plane, stopping only at vertices exhibiting reflex angles. Since these vertices are incident upon reflex edges, there will be at most $O(r)$ sweep-line stops, each incurring a search cost of $O(n)$ time. Of course, we can push further in that direction and bring down the normalization time to $O(n \log r)$, using, say, Mehlhorn and Hertel's triangulation algorithm [15]. Admittedly, there is little point optimizing the preprocessing, as its costs pale in the face of the $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$ running time of the main algorithm. Note that the normalization may increase the number of nonreflex edges, but does not affect n or r.

A. The fence-off phase. Our goal here is to triangulate a simple polytope of n vertices into $O(n^2)$ tetrahedra. The method works well when at least a fixed fraction of the edges are reflex. When this is not the case we must apply the pop-out phase in preprocessing. As far as the fence-off procedure is concerned, we begin by partitioning P into cylindrical pieces, and then we triangulate each piece separately. To build the cylindrical partition we attach vertical fences to each edge, reflex and nonreflex, one at a time. Let us say that a point p is *visible* from an edge if it can be connected to it by a vertical segment whose relative interior lies in the interior of P. The set of points visible from e is easily seen to be a monotone polygon: it is called the *fence* of the edge e and is to be attached to it. Our fences are similar to the *walls* used in the *slicing theorem* of (Aronov and Sharir [1]): one difference is that while fences project vertically onto their attaching edges, walls flood all over the free portion of the vertical plane passing through the edge. Three questions arise: (i) How do we erect a fence? (ii) Does fencing ensure convexity? (iii) How many new edges do we create in the process? We shall answer all three questions in that order.

In general, erecting fences will result in cutting off some edges into sub-edges. We shall still treat each edge as one entity, and deal with all its sub-edges in one fell swoop. Note that because of sub-edges, the fence attached to an edge e of P might be itself decomposed into monotone sub-pieces separated by vertical edges. We give a very simple, albeit slightly inefficient, method for computing the fence of e. Let Σ be the set of segments obtained by computing the intersection of ∂P and all previous fences with the vertical plane passing through e. In general, Σ forms disjoint polygonal boundaries augmented with vertical segments created by previous fences. Next, we compute the trapezoidal map induced by the visibility relation among the segments of Σ. This is the planar partition formed by Σ and all the vertical segments that connect endpoints to their visible segments in Σ. Since the number of fences is $O(n)$ and none can contribute more than a single segment to Σ (because of the monotonicity of the visibility polygons), the size of the trapezoidal map is $O(n)$. The entire computation can be carried out in $O(n \log n)$ time. The collection of regions incident upon e partitions its fence into trapezoids (figure 8). Once the fence is available, it must be added on to P and the previous fences.

Note that at any given time, the construction might leave fences with exposed edges "sticking out". The hope is that in the end P will be nicely decomposed into convex polytopes. Unfortunately, this is not always true. Of course, every reflex edge of P is "resolved" in the sense that the angles between its adjacent facets cease to be reflex. The problem is that new reflex edges might be created between two fences (figure 9). Let us examine this phenomenon in some detail. Let e be a vertical edge of a fence. Since the edge e is incident upon at least one vertex of P and ∂P is triangulated, the edge e cannot be left exposed after the fencing. It is conceivable, however, that e coincides with an edge of another fence which results in a reflex edge. What we can say at this point is that the fencing operation partitions P into cylindrical pieces which are free of nonvertical reflex edges. Each piece can be defined by (i) specifying a horizontal base polygon, (ii) lifting it vertically into an infinite cylinder, and (iii) clipping the cylinder between two planes (which do not intersect inside the cylinder). By triangulating the base polygons of each cylindrical piece we refine the partition into one consisting of cylindrical pieces whose base polygons are triangles. A triangulation of P follows trivially.

Once all fences are in, the partition of P involves a total of $O(n^2)$ vertices, edges, and facets. Triangulating the base polygons and finishing off the triangulation of P adds a constant multiplicative factor to the size of the decomposition. Therefore the description size of the final partition is $O(n^2)$, and consequently $O(n^2)$ tetrahedra are produced. The execution time for the entire fence-off phase is $O(n^2 \log n)$.

B. The pop-out phase. This is a form of preprocessing aimed at bringing down the number of vertices to the same order as the number of reflex edges. To begin with, we compute the degree of each pointed vertex of v of P. If the degree of v does not exceed some appropriate constant d, we compute the convex hull of its crown. The boundary of this hull consists of two polyhedral patches separated by the crown itself, one of which isolates the other from v. Let K be the polytope bounded by the patch in question and the cone of v. The cup of v is precisely K if and only if every reflex vertex and edge of P lies either outside K or on the

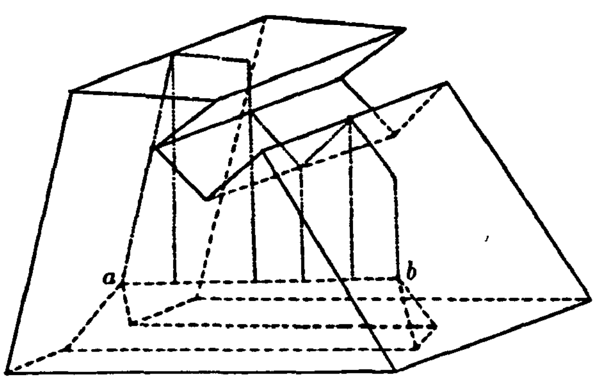

Figure 8: The fence of the edge ab

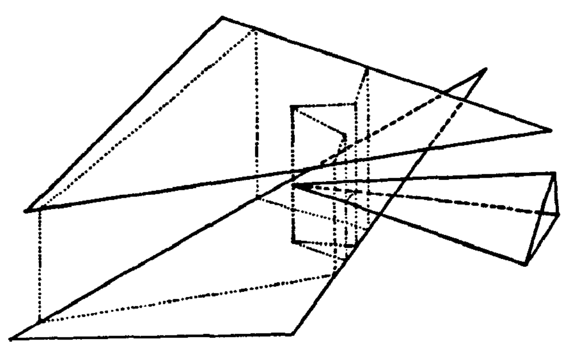

Figure 9: A nonconvex decomposition

boundary of the cone. We can check this easily in $O(dr)$ time and thus assert whether the dome of v is hindered or not. If it is not, then we insert a pointer to it in a queue of *favorable* vertices. Once all pointed vertices have been checked out and the queue is complete, we iterate on the following process until the queue is empty.

1. Let v be the favorable vertex referenced by the top of the queue. Triangulate its cup by connecting v to each nonincident edge of its triangulated boundary.
2. Remove from P each tetrahedron obtained in step 1, and renormalize the resulting polytope.
3. Remove from the queue any reference to v and its adjacent vertices.

From Lemma 2.7 and the fact that at most $d+1$ favorable vertices are removed from the queue each time step 3 is executed, we derive that this process removes at least

$$\frac{1}{d+1}\left(\frac{t-11}{3t}-\frac{2}{d+1}\right)(m-r) \geq \frac{(d-5)t-11(d+1)}{2(t+1)(d+1)^2}n \geq cn$$

vertices, for some constant $c > 0$. Thus we are left with a polytope with at most $(1-c)n$ vertices and r reflex edges. Repeating this pruning pass at most $O(\log n)$ times reduces the number of vertices to $O(r)$. Every time a favorable vertex is removed, reconfiguring the new polytope P can be done by local manipulation in constant time. Since each pruning pass removes at least a fixed fraction of the vertices, the pop-out phase accounts for

$$O(nr + \alpha nr + \alpha^2 nr + \cdots) = O(nr)$$

in the running time of the algorithm, where α is a fixed constant less than 1. Consequently, the pop-out phase requires $O(nr)$ time. Since each popped-out vertex produces at most $d-2$ new tetrahedra, by the end of this phase, P is decomposed into a collection of $O(n)$ tetrahedra and a polytope of $O(r)$ vertices.

C. Putting the pieces together. Given a simple polytope with n vertices and r reflex edges, we start the partitioning by (i) removing all flat vertices, and doing the obvious clean-up, (ii) triangulating the boundary, and (iii) applying the pop-out phase in case n greatly exceeds r. We finish the decomposition by going through the fence-off phase. The running time of the algorithm is $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$. In practice, it will be important to have a robust representation of cell complexes in 3-space in order to carry out the computation successfully and efficiently. A representation of three-dimensional polyhedral subdivisions, along with the set of navigational primitives needed to carry out the required cutting operations, can be found in (Dobkin and Laszlo [10]). We summarize our results below.

Theorem 3.1. *In $O(nr + r^2 \log r)$ time it is possible to partition a simple polytope with n vertices and r reflex edges into $O(n + r^2)$ tetrahedra. The time bound includes the cost of producing a full-fledged triangulation with an explicit description of its facial structure. Up to within a constant factor, the number of tetrahedra produced by the algorithm is optimal in the worst case.*

4 Closing Remarks

Of course, not every n-vertex polytope with r reflex edges necessitates $\Omega(n + r^2)$ tetrahedra to form a triangulation. Are there simple heuristics one could use to guarantee that the triangulation size does not exceed the minimum by more than a fixed constant in *all* cases? Is there a polynomial-time algorithm for such an approximation scheme? Also, it is often desirable to avoid long, skinny tetrahedra in mesh generation. See (Baker et al. [3]) for similar concerns in two dimensions. One approach is to retriangulate the undesirable tetrahedra produced by our triangulation. Again, are there preferred heuristics to keep the number of Steiner points as low as possible?

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