

# On the competitiveness of memoryless strategies for the Canadian Traveller Problem

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## Abstract

The  $k$ -Canadian Traveller Problem, defined and proven PSPACE-complete by Papadimitriou and Yannakakis, is a generalization of the Shortest Path Problem which admits blocked edges. Its objective is to determine the strategy that makes the traveller traverse graph  $G$  between two given nodes  $s$  and  $t$  with the minimal distance, knowing that at most  $k$  edges are blocked. The traveller discovers that an edge is blocked when arriving at its endpoint.

We study the competitiveness of randomized memoryless strategies for the  $k$ -CTP. In this context, a decision taken by the traveler in node  $v$  of  $G$  does not depend on its anterior moves. We establish that the competitive ratio of any randomized memoryless strategy cannot be better than  $2k + O(1)$ . The primordial consequence of this result is that randomized memoryless strategies are asymptotically as competitive as deterministic strategies which achieve a ratio  $2k + 1$  at best. In future research, if we aim at designing a strategy with competitive ratio  $\alpha k + O(1)$ ,  $\alpha < 2$ , we shall focus on strategies which not only are randomized but also use memory.

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## 1. Introduction

The *Canadian Traveller Problem* (CTP), a generalization of the *Shortest Path Problem*, was introduced in [6]. Given an undirected weighted graph  $G = (V, E, \omega)$  and two nodes  $s, t \in V$ , the objective is to design a strategy to make a traveller walk from  $s$  to  $t$  through  $G$  on the shortest path possible. Its particularity is that some edges of  $G$  are potentially blocked. The traveller does not know, however, which edges are blocked. This implies that we solve the CTP with online algorithms, called strategies. He discovers blocked edges, also called blockages, when arriving to its endpoints. The  *$k$ -Canadian Traveller Problem* ( $k$ -CTP) is the parameterized variant of CTP, where an upper bound  $k$  for the number of blocked edges is given. Both CTP and  $k$ -CTP are PSPACE-complete [2, 6].

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*State-of-the-art.* Strategies for the  $k$ -CTP are studied through the competitive analysis, which evaluates their quality [4]. The competitive ratio of a strategy is the maximum, over every satisfiable instance, of the ratio of the distance traversed by the traveller following the strategy and the *optimal offline cost*, which is the distance he traverses if he knows blocked edges from the beginning.

There are two classes of strategies: deterministic and randomized. Westphal [7] proved that there is no deterministic strategy that achieves a competitive ratio better than  $2k + 1$ . This ratio is reached by REPOSITION and COMPARISON strategies [7, 8]. The REPOSITION strategy consists in traversing the shortest  $(s, t)$ -path on the current graph. If the traveller discovers that an edge  $e^*$  of this path is blocked, he goes back to node  $s$  and restarts the process on graph  $G$  deprived of the edge  $e^*$ . This algorithm is executed in polynomial time. However, considering specific practical cases such as urban networks, returning to node  $s$  every time the traveller is blocked does not seem realistic. This is why Xu *et al.* [8] introduced the GREEDY algorithm. For grids, it achieves an  $\mathcal{O}(1)$  ratio, regardless of  $k$ . However, for any graph, this ratio is  $\mathcal{O}(2^k)$ .

We evaluate the competitiveness of the randomized strategies by calculating the maximal ratio of the mean distance traversed by the traveller following the strategy by the optimal offline cost. Westphal [7] proved that there is no randomized algorithm that can attain a ratio smaller than  $k + 1$ . However, unlike the deterministic case, no  $(\alpha k + 1)$ -competitive randomized strategy,  $\alpha < 2$ , was identified, excepted for very particular cases. Two randomized strategies have been proposed. Demaine *et al.* [5] designed a strategy with a ratio  $\left(1 + \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}\right)k + 1$ , executed in time of  $\mathcal{O}\left(k\mu^2 |E|^2\right)$  where parameter  $\mu$  may be exponential. It is dedicated to graphs that can be transformed into apex trees. Bender *et al.* studied in [3] a restriction of  $k$ -CTP for graphs composed of node-disjoint  $(s, t)$ -paths and proposed a polynomial-time strategy with ratio  $(k + 1)$ .

*Contributions and paper plan.* We study the competitiveness of memoryless strategies [1, 4]. The choice the traveller makes at node  $v$  (to decide where to go next) is independent of his travel before reaching node  $v$ . Given that deterministic memoryless strategies cannot achieve a ratio better than  $2k + 1$ , our goal is to prove that randomized memoryless strategies are not more competitive asymptotically. To do this, we identify a lower bound  $c_k = 2k + O(1)$  of the competitiveness of randomized memoryless strategies for the  $k$ -CTP.

We remind, in Section 2, the definitions of  $k$ -CTP, memoryless strategies and the competitive ratio. In Section 3, we present a set  $\mathcal{R}$  (called a road atlas) of *road maps*, *i.e.* pairs  $(G, E_*)$  with graph  $G$  and blocked edges  $E_*$ , on which we study the competitiveness of memoryless strategies. We associate, to any of these road maps, a binary tree representation which allows to understand the behavior of memoryless strategies on these road maps more comfortably. We prove in Section 4 that randomized memoryless strategies cannot drop below a ratio  $c_k = 2k + O(1)$  on road maps in  $\mathcal{R}$ . We also clarify expression  $O(1)$  in order to specify the asymptotic behavior of sequence  $c_k$ . Eventually, we draw conclusions and highlight the future work in Section 5.

## 2. Definitions

We start by introducing the notation. For any graph  $G = (V, E, \omega)$ , let  $G \setminus E'$  denotes its subgraph  $(V, E \setminus E', \omega)$ .

### 2.1. Memoryless Strategies for the $k$ -CTP

We remind the definition of CTP. Let  $G = (V, E, \omega)$  be an undirected graph with positive weights. The objective is to make a traveller traverse the graph from a source node  $s$  to a target one  $t$ , with  $s, t \in V$ . There is a set  $E_* \subsetneq E$  of blocked edges. The traveller does not know a priori which edges are blocked. He discovers a blocked edge only when arriving to one of its endpoints. For example, if  $(v, w)$  is a blockage he will discover it when arriving to  $v$  (or  $w$ ). The goal is to design the strategy  $A$  with the minimal competitive ratio.

We focus on *memoryless strategies* (MS). Concretely, we suppose that the traveller remembers the blocked edges he has discovered but forgets the nodes which he has already visited. In other words, a decision of an MS is independent of the nodes already visited. In the literature, the term *memoryless* was used in the context of online algorithms (e.g. PAGING PROBLEM [4], LIST UPDATE PROBLEM [1]) which take decisions according to the current state, ignoring past events. An MS can be either deterministic or randomized.

**Definition 1 (Memoryless Strategies for the  $k$ -CTP).** *A deterministic strategy  $A$  is an MS if and only if (iff) the next node  $w$  the traveller visits depends on graph  $G$  deprived of blocked edges already discovered  $E'_*$  and the current traveller position  $v$ :  $w = A(G \setminus E'_*, v)$ . Similarly, a randomized strategy  $A$  is an MS iff node  $w$  is the realization of a discrete random variable  $X = A(G \setminus E'_*, v)$ .*

MSes are easy to be implemented because they do not use past moves to take a decision. For example, the GREEDY strategy [8] is a deterministic MS. It consists in choosing at each step the first edge of the shortest path between the current node  $v$  and the target  $t$ . In contrast, the REPOSITION strategy [7] is not an MS as any decision refers to the past moves of the traveller. The polynomial-time strategies proposed in the literature do not use much memory information in the decision-taking process. Either they are memoryless or they use a weak quantity of memory. For example, REPOSITION (deterministic [7] or randomized [3]) can be implemented with a one bit memory given that the only information to retain is whether the traveller tries to reach  $t$  or to return to  $s$ .

The following process allows to identify whether a strategy  $A$  is a deterministic MS. Let us suppose that a traveller  $T_1$  executes strategy  $A$ : he has already visited certain nodes of the graph, he is currently at node  $v$  but he has not reached target  $t$  yet. Let us imagine a second traveller  $T_2$  who is airdropped on node  $v$  and starts applying strategy  $A$ . If the traveller  $T_2$  always follows the same path as  $T_1$  until reaching  $t$ ,  $A$  is a deterministic MS. If  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  may follow different paths, then  $A$  is not an MS. Formally, proving that a strategy is a MS consists in finding the function which transforms the pair  $(G \setminus E'_*, v)$  into node  $w = A(G \setminus E'_*, v)$ .

## 2.2. Competitive ratio

Let  $(G, E_*)$  be a *road map*, i.e. a pair with graph  $G = (V, E, \omega)$  and blocked edges  $E_* \subsetneq E$ , such that there is an  $(s, t)$ -path in graph  $G \setminus E_*$  (nodes  $s$  and  $t$  remain in the same connected component when all blocked edges are discovered). We note  $\omega_A(G, E_*)$  the distance traversed by the traveller reaching  $t$  with strategy  $A$  on graph  $G$  with blocked edges  $E_*$  and  $\omega_{\min}(G, E_*)$  the cost of the shortest  $(s, t)$ -path in graph  $G \setminus E_*$ .

The ratio  $\omega_A(G, E_*) / \omega_{\min}(G, E_*)$  is abbreviated as  $c_A(G, E_*)$ . A strategy  $A$  is  $c_A$ -competitive [4, 8] iff for any  $(G, E_*)$ ,  $\omega_A(G, E_*) \leq c_A \omega_{\min}(G, E_*)$ . Otherwise stated, for any  $(G, E_*)$ ,  $c_A(G, E_*) \leq c_A$ . If strategy  $A$  is randomized,  $\omega_A(G, E_*)$  is replaced by  $\mathbb{E}(\omega_A(G, E_*))$  which is the expected distance traversed by the traveller to reach  $t$  with strategy  $A$ . The competitive ratio can also be evaluated on a family  $\mathcal{R}$  of road maps, put formally,

$$c_{A, \mathcal{R}} = \max_{(G, E_*) \in \mathcal{R}} c_A(G, E_*) \quad (1)$$

This “local” competitive ratio fulfils  $c_{A, \mathcal{R}} \leq c_A$ . The definition of the competitive ratio can also be extended to families of strategies. We note  $c_{\text{MS}}$  the competitive ratio of MSes, which is the minimum over competitive ratios of any MSes:  $c_{\text{MS}} = \min_{A \text{ MS}} c_A$ . In the remainder, we identify a set of road maps  $\mathcal{R}$  such that the competitive ratio of MSes on it is  $2k + O(1)$ .

## 3. Road atlas used to study randomized MSes

We specify a *road atlas*  $\mathcal{R}$  which is a set of road maps. We introduce a family of graphs  $G_i$  such that graphs composing this road atlas are subgraphs of  $G_i$ . Set  $\mathcal{R}$  will be used to evaluate the competitiveness of randomized MSes.

### 3.1. Graphs $G_i$

We define recursively a sequence of graphs  $G_i$  for  $i \geq 1$  with weights from  $\{1, \varepsilon\}$ ,  $0 < \varepsilon \ll 1$ . Graphs  $G_1$  and  $G_{i+1}$  are represented in Figures 1a and 1b, respectively. Graphs  $G_2$  and  $G_3$  are shown in Figure 1c and 1d. Edges with weight 1 are thicker than edges with weight  $\varepsilon$ . On any graph  $G_i$ , axis  $\Delta_{\text{vert}}$  is the vertical axis of symmetry (see Figures 1c and 1d).

We focus on road maps  $(G_i, E_*)$  composed of graph  $G_i$  and at most  $i$  blocked edges  $E_*$  at the right of axis  $\Delta_{\text{vert}}$  in graph  $G_i$ . Indeed, blocking edges left to  $\Delta_{\text{vert}}$  affects negligibly the total distance traversed by a traveller. Let us suppose that the traveller, guided by a MS, traverses graph  $G_i$  and has already discovered some blocked edges  $E' \subseteq E_*$ . He tries now to reach  $t$  on graph  $G_i \setminus E'$ , ignoring that the undiscovered blocked edges are  $E'_* = E_* \setminus E'$ . We note  $\mathcal{G}$  the set of all these graphs. Formally,  $\mathcal{G} = \bigcup_{i=1}^{+\infty} \mathcal{G}_i$  with  $\mathcal{G}_i = \{G_i \setminus E' : |E'| \leq i\}$ .

When the traveller discover blocked edges in a graph  $G \in \mathcal{G}_i$ , parts of the graph become *dead ends*. If a traveller visits a dead end, the only chance for him to reach  $t$  is to leave it anyway. Dead ends only provide to the traveller additional costs which make the competitive ratio increase. Therefore, the most

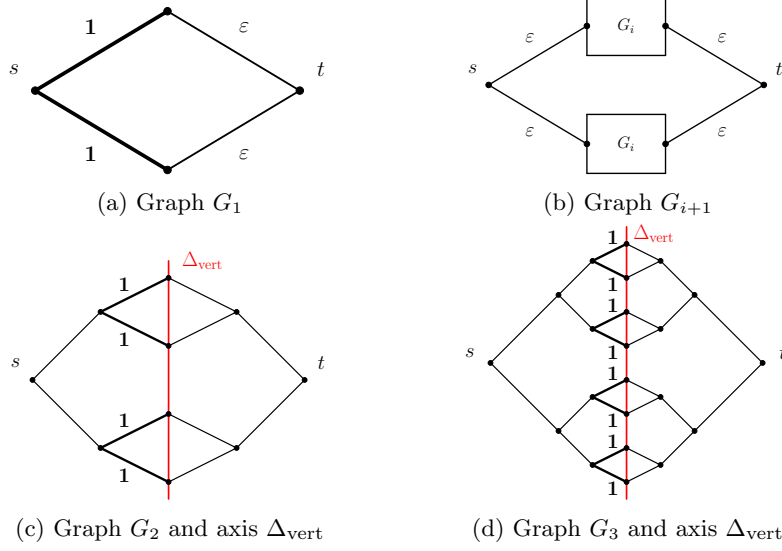


Figure 1: Recursive construction of graphs  $G_i$ . Weights  $\varepsilon$  are not indicated in Figures 1c and 1d to keep them readable.

competitive strategies (memoryless or not) do not visit dead ends. As soon as a dead end appear when the traveller discovers a blockage, we delete it from the graph. Graph  $G \setminus E'$  becomes graph  $G$  deprived of both edges  $E'$  and dead ends.

### 3.2. Equivalent binary trees

For any graph  $G$  of  $\mathcal{G}_k$ , we define an equivalent binary tree (EBT) noted  $T_G$  which represents all *separations* (notion defined below) from  $t$  in graph  $G$ . We note  $T_\emptyset$  the empty tree. Any nonempty tree is a triplet  $(v, T_a, T_b)$  with a root  $v \in V$  and two subtrees  $T_a$  and  $T_b$ .

The EBT is obtained thanks to a breadth-first search (BFS) from  $t$  in direction of nodes on axis  $\Delta_{\text{vert}}$ . Node  $t$  is the root of the EBT. Graphically, each node from which there is a *separation*, *i.e.* there are two possible directions for the next move of the BFS, provides two extra branches in the tree (see nodes

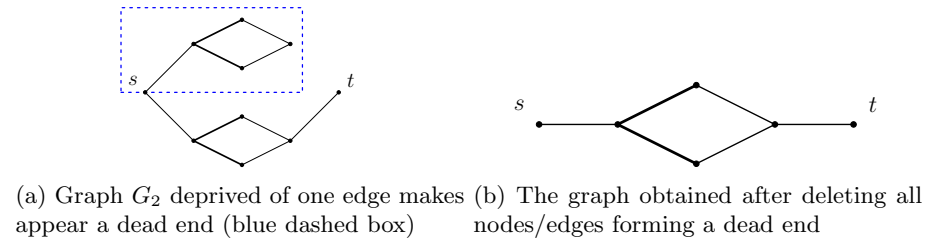


Figure 2: An illustration of dead ends on graph  $G_2$ .

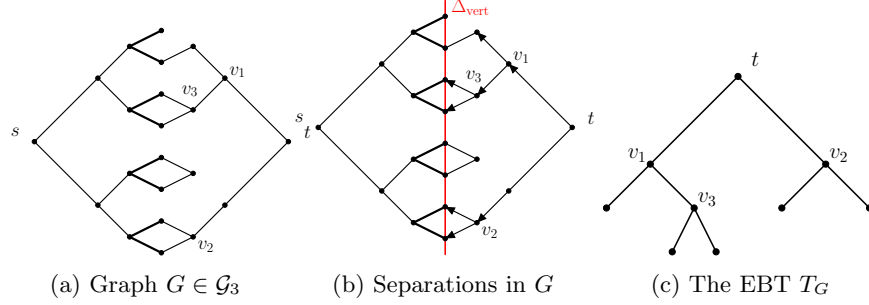


Figure 3: An example of graph  $G \in \mathcal{G}_3$  and its EBT  $T_G$ .

$t$ ,  $v_1$ ,  $v_2$  and  $v_3$  in Figure 3b). Figures 3a, 3b and 3c illustrate the construction of the EBT. To put the definition of EBTs formally, let  $\text{BFS}(v)$  denote the set of nodes visited just after node  $v$  in the BFS starting from  $t$ . For example,  $v_1 \in \text{BFS}(t)$  and  $v_3 \in \text{BFS}(v_1)$ . We force this BFS to stop on axis  $\Delta_{\text{vert}}$  such that  $v \in \Delta_{\text{vert}} \Rightarrow \text{BFS}(v) = \emptyset$ . We define below function  $\text{BIN-TREE}$  which gives the construction of tree  $T_G$  fulfilling  $\text{BIN-TREE}(t) = T_G$ .

$$\text{BIN-TREE}(v) = \begin{cases} T_{\emptyset} & \text{if } \text{BFS}(v) = \emptyset \\ \text{BIN-TREE}(v_{\text{next}}) & \text{if } \text{BFS}(v) = \{v_{\text{next}}\} \\ (v, \text{BIN-TREE}(v_{\text{up}}), \text{BIN-TREE}(v_{\text{down}})) & \text{if } \text{BFS}(v) = \{v_{\text{up}}, v_{\text{down}}\} \end{cases}$$

We introduce notations which characterize some elements in an EBT. For any edge  $e$  in EBT  $T$ , we note  $P(e)$  the parent edge of  $e$ . Let  $U(e)$  denote the “uncle” of edge  $e$ , which has the same parent than  $P(e)$ . Put formally,  $U(e) = \{e' \in T : P(e') = P(P(e)) = P^2(e)\}$ . For any EBT  $T$ , we define recursively a set of edges  $E_T(k)$  which is the set of edges with depth  $k$ . Set  $E_T(0)$  represents the edges connected to the root  $t$  and  $E_T(k) = \{e : P(e) \in E_T(k-1)\}$ . For a given tree  $T$ , we note  $D_{\min}(T)$  the minimum depth of the leaves of  $T$ . We constitute then the set of graph  $\mathcal{D}_k = \{G \in \mathcal{G} : D_{\min}(T_G) \geq k\}$ .

We study the competitiveness of MSes on the road atlas  $\mathcal{R}$  composed of road maps with graph of  $\mathcal{D}_k$  with  $k$  blocked edges. Formally,

$$\mathcal{R} = \bigcup_{k=1}^{+\infty} \mathcal{R}_k \text{ with } \mathcal{R}_k = \{(G, E_*) : G \in \mathcal{D}_k, |E_*| = k\}$$

We pursue our reasoning by establishing properties on EBTs  $T_G$  to understand the behavior of MSes on graphs  $G \in \mathcal{G}_k$ . Theorem 1 states that cutting an edges from  $G \in \mathcal{D}_k$  result on a graph in  $G \in \mathcal{D}_{k-1}$ .

**Theorem 1.** *For any graph  $G \in \mathcal{D}_k$ ,  $G \setminus \{e\} \in \mathcal{D}_{k-1}$ .*

**Proof.** Given a graph  $G \in \mathcal{D}_k$  and an edge  $e$  from this graph. The edge  $e$  can be associated to an edge in  $T_G$ . We note  $v$  the “root” of edge  $e$ , i.e. node  $v$  such that  $e = (u, v)$  and  $v = P(u)$ . Let  $T_v$  be the subtree of  $T_G$  with root  $v$  and

$w$  be the “sibling” of  $u$  (said differently the second son of node  $v$ ). When edge  $e$  is removed from  $G$ , not only edge  $e$  but also its descendants disappear in the EBT and  $T_v$  becomes  $T_w$ , the subtree of root  $w$ .

All the leaves of  $T_w$  have initially a depth greater than  $k$  so by removing  $e$  from  $G$ , all the leaves of  $T_w$  have a depth greater than  $k - 1$ . All the other leaves which are not in  $T_v$  keep the same depth *i.e.* a depth greater than  $k$ . So every leaves of  $T_{G \setminus \{e\}}$  have a depth greater than  $k - 1$ .

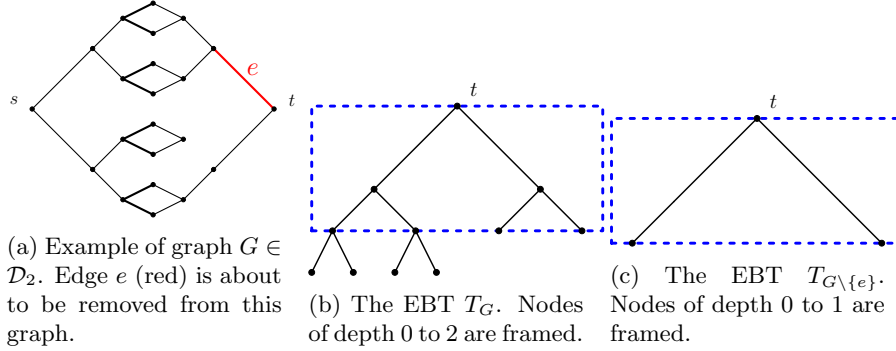


Figure 4: Illustrating the proof of Theorem 1 on a graph of  $\mathcal{G}_3$ .

#### 4. Competitiveness of randomized MSes

We study the competitiveness of a random MS for every  $\mathcal{R}_k$ . The Theorem 2 tells us that the competitive ratio of an optimal MS is the same for every graph of  $\mathcal{D}_k$ . The proof gives us a recursive formula of this competitive ratio.

**Theorem 2.** *For any graph  $G, G' \in \mathcal{D}_k$ ,  $c_{MS}(G) = c_{MS}(G') = c_{MS, \mathcal{R}_k} = c_k$ .*

**Proof.** If  $k = 0$ , then for every graph of  $\mathcal{D}_0$ ,  $c_{MS}(G) = 1$  because the first path the traveler will take will not have any blocked edge. So  $c_0 = 1$ .

We assume the theorem holds for  $k - 1$ . Let  $G \in \mathcal{D}_k$ . Every leaves of  $T_G$  are at depth greater than  $k$ , so the EBT is complete until depth  $k$ :  $T_G$  has  $2^k$  nodes at depth  $k$ . For a MS, we define  $(p_i)_{i < 2^k}$  by the probability that the traveler travels by the  $i^{\text{th}}$  node at depth  $k$ .

Given a set of blocked edges  $E_*$ , we associate  $J(E_*)$  being the set of nodes at depth  $k$  where each  $(s, t)$ -path that travels through this node is not blocked. For any node  $v$  of depth  $k$ , we can construct a set of blocked edges such that  $|J(E_*)| = 1$ . Indeed, given a node  $v$  of depth  $k$ , let  $e$  be the edge of the sibling of  $v$ . By blocking  $e$ ,  $U(e)$ ,  $U(U(e)) \dots U^{k-1}(e)$ , we block respectively 1, 2, 4,  $\dots$ ,  $2^{k-1}$  nodes. Every edge being the uncle of another, the blocked nodes are disjoint. So finally, only  $v$  is not blocked.

For a given set of blocked edges  $E_*$ , if  $v$  is in  $J(E_*)$ , then by traveling by  $v$ , the cost will be 1. If  $v$  is not in  $J(E_*)$ , the traveler has to turn back and

choose another path with a road map with  $k - 1$  blocked edges. Theorem 1 we saw that  $G$  without the cut edge is in  $\mathcal{D}_{k-1}$ , so the cost will be at most  $2 + c_{k-1}$  by hypothesis. Formally,

$$c_A(G, E_*) \leq \left( \sum_{j \in J(E_*)} p_j \right) \times 1 + \left( \sum_{j \notin J(E_*)} p_j \right) \times (2 + c_{k-1})$$

We remark that  $1 < 2 + c_{k-1}$  so the greater  $J(E_*)$  is, the lower  $c_A(G, E_*)$  will be. Thus, we remark that for  $E_*$  in  $\mathcal{F}'$ , the inequality above is an equality. So for each  $E_*$ , it exists  $E' \in_m \text{cal}f$  such that  $c_A(G, E_*) \leq c_A(G, E')$ . Finally :

$$c_A(G, \mathcal{R}_k) = \max_{j < 2^k} p_j + (1 - p_j)(2 + c_{k-1}) = p_{\min} + (1 - p_{\min})(2 + c_{k-1})$$

with  $p_{\min}$  the lowest probability. However,  $p_{\min} \leq \frac{1}{2^k}$  and  $c_A(G, \mathcal{R}_k)$  minimum for  $p_{\min}$  maximum, so  $p_{\min} = \frac{1}{2^k}$ . The result is that  $c_{MS}(G)$  only depend on  $k$  and :

$$c_k = \frac{1}{2^k} + \left( 1 - \frac{1}{2^k} \right) (2 + c_{k-1})$$

■

## 5. Conclusion and further work

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