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Thomas Dissaux, Guillaume Ducoffe, Nicolas Nisse, Simon Nivelle. Treelength of Series-parallel graphs. LAGOS 2021 - XI Latin and American Algorithms, Graphs and Optimization Symposium, May 2021, São Paulo / Virtual, Brazil. 10.1016/j.procs.2021.11.008 . hal-03175837

**HAL Id: hal-03175837**

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Thomas Dissaux, Guillaume Ducoffe, Nicolas Nisse, Simon Nivelle. Treelength of Series-parallel graphs. [Research Report] Inria & Université Cote d'Azur, CNRS, I3S, Sophia Antipolis, France. 2020. hal-03010346

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# Treelength of Series-parallel graphs\*

Thomas Dissaux<sup>1</sup>, Guillaume Ducoffe<sup>2</sup>, Nicolas Nisse<sup>1</sup>, and Simon Nivelles<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Université Côte d’Azur, CNRS, Inria, I3S, Sophia Antipolis, France

<sup>2</sup>University of Bucharest & National Institute of Research and Development in Informatics, Romania

<sup>3</sup>INSPÉ Paris, Sorbonne Université, France

November 17, 2020

## Abstract

The *length* of a *tree-decomposition* of a graph is the maximum distance between two vertices of a same bag of the decomposition. The *treelength* of a graph is the minimum length among its tree-decomposition. Treelength of graphs has been studied for its algorithmic applications in classical metric problems such as Traveling Salesman Problem or metric dimension of graphs and also, in compact routing in the context of distributed computing. Deciding whether the treelength of a general graph is at most 2 is NP-complete (graphs of treelength one are precisely the chordal graphs), and it is known that the treelength of a graph cannot be approximated up to a factor less than  $\frac{3}{2}$  (the best known approximation algorithm for treelength has an approximation ratio of 3). However, nothing is known on the computational complexity of treelength in planar graphs, except that the treelength of any outerplanar graph is equal to the third of the maximum size of its isometric cycles. This work initiates the study of treelength in planar graphs by considering its next natural subclass, namely the one of series-parallel graphs.

We first fully describe the treelength of melon graphs (set of pairwise internally disjoint paths linking two vertices), showing that, even in such a restricted graph class, the expression of the treelength is not trivial. Then, we show that treelength can be approximated up to a factor  $\frac{3}{2}$  in series-parallel graphs. Our main result is a polynomial-time algorithm for deciding whether a series-parallel graph has treelength at most 2. Our latter result relies on a characterization of series-parallel graphs with treelength 2 in terms of an infinite family of forbidden isometric subgraphs.

## 1 Introduction

**Treewidth.** *Tree-decompositions* of graphs have been initially introduced by Halin [18] and then rediscovered as part of the Graph Minor Theory by Robertson and Seymour [23]. Roughly speaking, a tree-decomposition of a graph describes it using a set of subsets (called *bags*) of its

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\*T. Dissaux and N. Nisse are partly funded by STIC-AmSud project GALOP, PHC Xu Guangqi project DESPROGES, the UCA<sup>JEDI</sup> Investments in the Future project managed by the National Research Agency (ANR-15-IDEX-01), the ANR project MULTIMOD (ANR-17-CE22-0016) and the ANR project Digraphs (ANR-19-CE48-0013).

G. Ducoffe was supported by project PN 19 37 04 01 “New solutions for complex problems in current ICT research fields based on modelling and optimization”, funded by the Romanian Core Program of the Ministry of Research and Innovation (MCI) 2019-2022, and by a grant of Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation CCCDI-UEFISCDI. project no. 17PCCDI/2018.

vertices that are organized in a tree-like fashion. The classical measure of a tree-decomposition is its *width*, i.e., the maximum size (minus one) of its bags, and the *treewidth*, denoted by  $tw(G)$ , of a graph  $G$  is the minimum width of its tree-decompositions. Tree-decompositions have been extensively studied due to their various algorithmic applications. For instance, numerous NP-hard problems can be solved in linear time in bounded treewidth graphs [3, 8]; tree-decompositions are used as part of many efficient parametrized algorithms [5]; they play a crucial role in the design of sub-exponential algorithms in the context of bi-dimensionality [10], *etc.* (see [9, 12] for more details).

To make the most of previous results, being able to compute tree-decompositions with small width is an important pre-requisite. Unfortunately, computing the treewidth of an  $n$ -node graph  $G$  is NP-hard [1] and the best known approximation algorithm has approximation-ratio  $O(\sqrt{\log tw(G)})$  [17]. While computing the treewidth is *FPT*, i.e., deciding whether  $tw(G) \leq k$  can be solved in time  $O(2^{k^3} n)$  [6], the latter algorithm cannot be used in practice since it is super-exponential in  $k$  and due to the large constant hidden in the “big  $O$ ”. On the positive side, an integer  $k$  being fixed, there exists an algorithm that, given an input  $n$ -node graph  $G$ , decides if  $tw(G) > k$  or computes a tree-decomposition of  $G$  with width at most  $5k$  in time  $O(2^k n)$  [4]. The case of planar graphs is particularly interesting since, while approximation algorithms exist [19, 24], the status of the computational complexity of treewidth in planar graphs is open since 30 years.

**Treelength.** Appart from its width, other parameters have been proposed as “measures” of a tree-decomposition. In particular, the *length* (resp., *breadth*) of a tree-decomposition is the maximum *diameter* (resp., *radius*) of its bags. The *treelength* of a graph  $G$ , denoted by  $tl(G)$ , is then the minimum length of its tree-decomposition [13] and the *treewidth* is defined accordingly [14]. Both treelength and treewidth also have algorithmic interests. For instance, the *Traveling Salesman Problem* admits a FPTAS in bounded treelength graphs [21]; *metric dimension* is FPT in the treelength [2]; efficient compact routing schemes and sparse additive spanners can be built in the class of bounded treelength or bounded treewidth graphs [13, 14, 20], *etc.* Unfortunately, both these parameters are not even FPT since deciding if a graph has treelength at most two (resp., has treewidth at most one) is NP-complete [15, 22]. On the positive side, both parameters can be efficiently approximated: treelength can be approximated up to a factor 3 using a BFS-like algorithm [13] (the approximation for treewidth follows since the treelength of a graph is at most twice its treewidth). Concerning treelength and treewidth of planar graphs, very few is known. In [15], it was shown that deciding whether the treewidth is at most one can be solved in polynomial-time in the class of  $K_{3,3}$ -minor-free graphs. The treelength of an *outerplanar* graph equals the third of its largest *isometric* cycle [13], but it is not even known whether deciding if the treelength of a planar graph is at most two can be solved in polynomial-time.

This paper initiates the study of computational complexity of treelength in planar graphs by considering its next (after outerplanar graphs) natural subclass, namely in *series-parallel* graphs [16, 25].

**Relationship between treewidth and treelength.** Another motivation for this work is that achieving exact (or better approximation) algorithms for computing the treelength may lead toward better (more efficient or with better approximation ratio) approximation algorithms for computing the treewidth in large graph classes. In general, treewidth and treelength are not comparable. The treewidth of any  $n$ -node cycle equals 2 while its treelength equals  $\lceil \frac{n}{3} \rceil$  [13]. On the other hand, the treewidth of the complete graph with  $n$  vertices equals  $n - 1$  while its treelength equals one. However, these graph classes (cycles and complete graphs) are somehow the extreme cases since it has been proved that, in the class of graphs  $G$  excluding an *apex*

graph as minor (including planar graphs) and with bounded largest isometric cycle,  $tw(G) = \Theta(tl(G))$  [7]. More specifically, [11] presents a polynomial-time algorithm that, given a tree-decomposition of length  $\ell$  of a planar graph  $G$ , computes tree-decomposition of width at most  $9\ell$  for  $G$ . Therefore, computing tree-decompositions with “small” length would imply “good” approximation algorithms for the treewidth of planar graphs.

**Our contributions.** We focus on the computation of the treelength in series-parallel graphs. Section 2 is devoted to the formal definitions of the main concepts used throughout the paper. In Section 3, we consider *melon* graphs, i.e., series-parallel graphs  $G$  obtained by identifying the endpoints of pairwise internally disjoint paths  $(P_i)_{i \leq p}$  of respective length  $\ell_i$  (with  $\ell_1 \geq \dots \geq \ell_p$ ). We show that, in any melon graph  $G$ ,  $tl(G) = \min\{\lceil \frac{lc(G)}{3} \rceil, \max\{\lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil, \ell_p\}\}$  where  $is(G)$  (resp.,  $lc(G)$ ) is the size of a largest isometric (resp., of a largest) cycle in  $G$ . Moreover, we exhibit an example of series-parallel graph for which it seems harder to link the treelength to the size of its maximum (isometric) cycles. In our next results, we make use of the *nested ear-decompositions* [16] of series-parallel graphs. In Section 4, we design a  $\frac{3}{2}$ -approximation algorithm for computing the treelength of series-parallel graphs. In Section 5, our main result is that a series-parallel graph  $G$  has treelength at most two if and only if its largest isometric cycle has length at most 6 and  $G$  has no *Dumbo graph* (see definition below) as isometric subgraph. This characterization leads to a polynomial-time algorithm that decides if a series-parallel graph has treelength at most two. Finally, we conclude in Section 6 by discussing how our results may be generalized to compute treelength of series-parallel graphs.

## 2 Preliminaries

In this paper, we consider only undirected unweighted simple (without loops nor parallel edges) graphs. A graph  $G = (V, E)$  is *connected* if, for every  $u, v \in V$ , there exists a path between  $u$  and  $v$  in  $G$ . We now only consider connected graphs. For any  $v \in V$ , let  $N_G(v)$  be the neighbors of  $v$  in  $G$  (i.e.  $N_G(v) = \{w \in V(G) \mid (v, w) \in E(G)\}$ ) and let  $N_G(S)$  be the set of vertices in  $G$  adjacent to a vertex in  $S$  (i.e.  $N_G(S) = \bigcup_{v \in S} N_G(v) \setminus S$ ). The *distance*  $d_G(u, v)$  in  $G = (V, E)$  between two vertices  $u, v \in V$  equals the minimum *length* (number of edges) of a path linking  $u$  and  $v$  in  $G$ , and  $P_G(u, v)$  denotes any shortest  $u, v$ -path. The *diameter* of  $G$  is the maximum distance between its vertices, i.e.,  $\max_{u, v \in V} d_G(u, v)$ . A *subgraph*  $H = (V(H) \subseteq V, E(H) \subseteq E \cap (V(H) \times V(H)))$  of  $G$  is *isometric* if  $d_H(u, v) = d_G(u, v)$  for every  $u, v \in V(H)$ , i.e., if  $H$  *preserves* the distances of  $G$ . Let  $is(G)$  be the largest size of an isometric cycle in  $G$ .

**Tree-decompositions.** A *tree-decomposition* of a graph  $G = (V, E)$  is a pair  $(T, \mathcal{X} = \{X_t \mid t \in V(T)\})$  such that  $T$  is a tree, and  $\mathcal{X}$  is a set of subsets (called *bags*) of vertices of  $G$ , indexing the nodes of  $T$  such that:

- $\bigcup_{t \in V(T)} X_t = V(G)$ ;
- for every  $\{u, v\} \in E(G)$ , there exists  $t \in V(T)$  such that  $u, v \in X_t$ ;
- for every  $v \in V(G)$ , the set  $\{t \in V(T) \mid v \in X_t\}$  induces a subtree of  $T$ .

We may further assume that  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  is *reduced*, i.e., no bag is included in another one. The *width* of  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  equals  $\max_{t \in V(T)} |X_t| - 1$ , i.e., the largest size (minus one) of the bags of  $(T, \mathcal{X})$ . The *treewidth*  $tw(G)$  of  $G$  is the minimum width of the tree-decompositions of  $G$ . The *length*, denoted by  $length(T, \mathcal{X})$ , of  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  equals  $\max_{t \in V(T)} \max_{u, v \in X_t} d_G(u, v)$ , i.e., the maximum diameter (in  $G$ ) of its bags. The *treelength*  $tl(G)$  of  $G$  is the minimum length of the tree-decompositions of  $G$ .

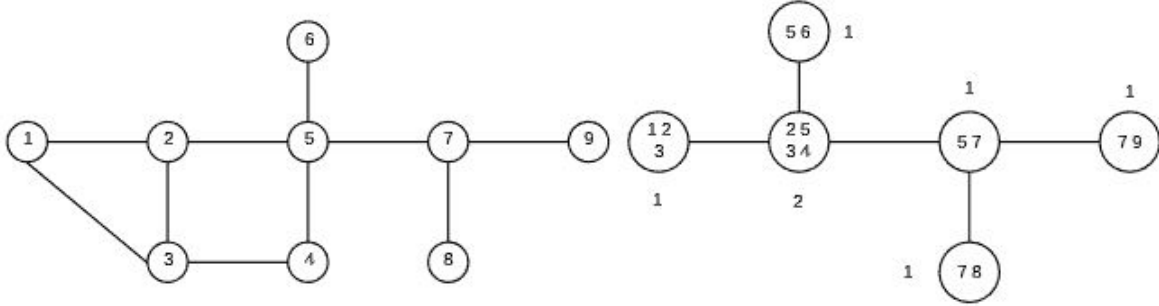


Figure 1: Example of a tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  (right) of minimum length for the graph  $G$  (left) with each bag's diameters (integer outside the bags).

In what follows, we will use the following lemma that follows from the fact that  $tl(C_n) = \lceil \frac{n}{3} \rceil$  for any  $n$ -node cycle  $C_n$  [13].

**Lemma 1** [13] *Let  $G$  be any graph and  $H$  be any isometric subgraph of  $G$ . Then,  $tl(H) \leq tl(G)$ . In particular,  $tl(G) \geq \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$ .*

Given a connected graph  $G = (V, E)$ , a set  $S \subset V$  is a *separator* if  $G \setminus S$  (obtained from  $G$  by removing the vertices of  $S$ ) is not connected. It is well known that, in any reduced tree-decomposition, the intersection between two adjacent bags is a separator of the graph. The set  $S$  is a *clique separator* of  $G$  if moreover the subgraph  $G[S]$  induced by  $S$  in  $G$  is a complete graph. It is easy to show that, for any graph  $G$  with a clique separator  $S$  and  $\mathcal{C}$  being the set of connected components of  $G \setminus S$ , then  $tw(G) = \max_{C \in \mathcal{C}} tw(G[C \cup S])$  and  $tl(G) = \max_{C \in \mathcal{C}} tl(G[C \cup S])$ .

A graph  $G$  is called *prime* if it does not admit any clique separator. Therefore, from now on, we will only consider prime graphs. In particular, we only consider *2-connected* graphs, i.e., graphs with no separator of size one.

**Series-parallel graphs.** An  $(s, t)$ -series-parallel graph is any graph (with two distinguished vertices  $s$  and  $t$ ) recursively defined as follows. An edge  $st$  is a  $(s, t)$ -series-parallel graph. Moreover, given an  $(s_1, t_1)$ -series-parallel graph  $G_1$  and an  $(s_2, t_2)$ -series-parallel graph  $G_2$ , a  $(s, t)$ -series-parallel graph  $G$  can be obtained from  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  either:

**serie composition:** by identifying  $t_1$  and  $s_2$  (in which case  $s = s_1$ , and  $t = t_2$ ) or,

**parallel composition:** by identifying  $s_1$  and  $s_2$  on the one hand, and  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  on the other hand (in which case  $s = s_1 = s_2$ , and  $t = t_1 = t_2$ ).

A graph  $G = (V, E)$  is *series-parallel* if there are two vertices  $s, t \in V$  such that  $G$  is an  $(s, t)$ -series-parallel graph. It is well known that a graph is  $K_4$ -minor free, or equivalently has treewidth at most 2, if and only if its 2-connected components are series-parallel []. Note that outerplanar graphs are precisely  $(K_4, K_{2,3})$ -minor free graphs and so 2-connected outerplanar graphs are included in the class of series-parallel graphs.

Note that, in any series-parallel graph  $G$ , a largest isometric cycle (and so  $is(G)$ ) can be computed in linear time by a simple dynamic programming algorithm (using a recursive sequence of compositions that can be obtained in linear time [25]).

**Ear-decompositions.** An *ear-decomposition* of a graph  $G = (V, E)$  is a partition  $(E_0, E_1, \dots, E_p)$  of  $E$  such that  $E_0$  induces a cycle in  $G$  and, for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $E_i$  induces a path between

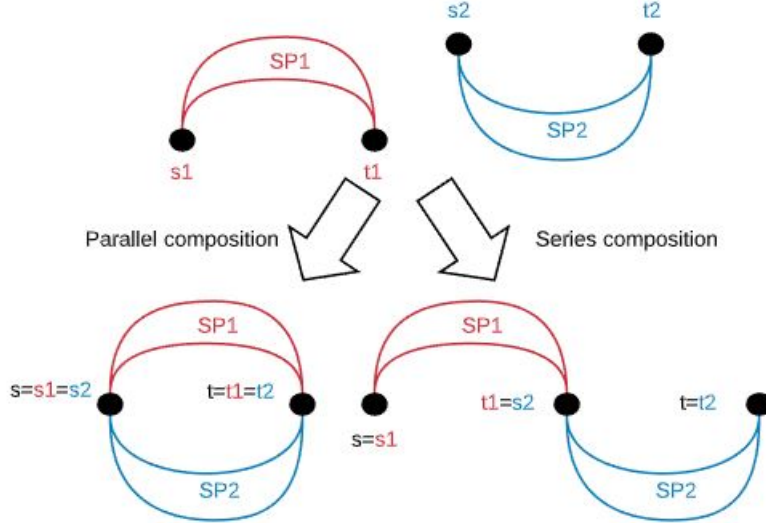


Figure 2: Series and parallel composition for two series-parallel graph

two vertices  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  in  $G$ . Moreover,  $V(E_i) \cap V(G_{i-1}) = \{a_i, b_i\}$  where  $G_{i-1}$  is the subgraph induced by  $\bigcup_{j \leq i-1} V(E_j)$  (that is, the path induced by  $E_i$  is internally disjoint from  $V(E_0), \dots, V(E_{i-1})$ ). We say that  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  are the *attachment vertices* of  $E_i$  in  $G_{i-1}$ . It is well known that a graph admits an ear decomposition if and only if it is 2-connected [12].

An ear decomposition is *nested* if moreover, for every  $1 \leq i \leq i' \leq p$ :

- the attachment vertices  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  of  $E_i$  appear in a previous ear  $E_j$ , with  $j < i$ , *i.e.* there exists  $j < i$  such that  $a_i, b_i \in V(E_j)$ , in which case we say that  $E_i$  is attached to  $E_j$ . Let  $j_i$  be the smallest index  $0 \leq j < i$  such that  $E_i$  is attached to  $E_j$ , and
- if two ears  $E_i$  and  $E_{i'}$  are both attached to some ear  $E_j$ , then either the path  $P_{E_j}(a_i, b_i)$  between  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  in  $E_j$  contains (not necessarily properly)  $P_{E_j}(a_{i'}, b_{i'})$ , or vice versa, or  $P_{E_j}(a_i, b_i)$  and  $P_{E_j}(a_{i'}, b_{i'})$  are internally vertex-disjoint. That is, two ears “do not cross” each other.

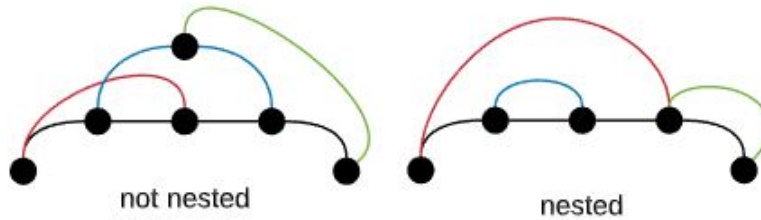


Figure 3: Example of nested and not nested ears

A graph is a 2-connected series-parallel graph if and only if it admits a nested ear decomposition [16]. It is easy to prove that we may further assume that  $E_0$  is a largest isometric cycle of  $G$  and that, for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ ,  $|E_i| \geq |P_{E_{j_i}}(a_i, b_i)|$ , *i.e.*, equivalently that  $G_i$  is an isometric

subgraph of  $G$  for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ . A nested ear-decomposition satisfying the latter condition is called *increasing*.

**Lemma 2** *For any 2-connected series-parallel graph  $G$ , an increasing nested ear decomposition starting from a maximum isometric cycle of  $G$  can be computed in quadratic time.*

**Proof.** First, note that we can compute in polynomial time a maximal isometric cycle  $C$  of  $G$  and its length. Then we can compute an increasing nested ear decomposition of  $G$  in polynomial time as follow:

- Step  $E_0$ :  $G_0 = G[V(C)]$
- Step  $E_i$ : with  $1 \leq i \leq p$ : Let  $C_1, \dots, C_k$  be the  $k$  connected component of  $G \setminus G_{i-1}$ . Let  $C^*$  be any component  $C_j$  for any  $1 \leq j \leq k$  union  $V(N_{G_{i-1} \cup C_j}(C_j))$ . Note that  $V(N_{G_{i-1} \cup C_j}(C_j)) = \{a_i, b_i\}$ . Let  $E_i$  be a shortest path between  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  and  $G_i = G[V(G_{i-1}) \cup V(E_i)]$

Note that since we define  $E_i$  as a shortest path, it is impossible that an ear  $E'_i$  is attached to  $E_i$  such that  $|E'_i| < |P_{E_i}(a_i, b_i)|$ . ■

### 3 Simple series-parallel graphs

This section is devoted to the simplest (including the cycles) subclass of 2-connected series-parallel graphs that we call the *melon* graphs. A *melon* graph is any graph  $G = (P_1, \dots, P_p)$  obtained from two vertices  $x$  and  $y$  by adding  $p \geq 2$  internally vertex-disjoint paths  $P_1, \dots, P_p$  between  $x$  and  $y$ . In what follows, let  $\ell_i = |P_i|$  be the length of  $P_i$  for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$  and, w.l.o.g., let us assume that  $\ell_1 \geq \dots \geq \ell_p > 0$ . Note that a largest isometric cycle of  $G$  consists of  $P_1$  and  $P_p$  and so  $is(G_S) = \ell_1 + \ell_p$  and that a largest cycle consists of  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  and has size  $lc(G) = \ell_1 + \ell_2 \geq is(G)$ .

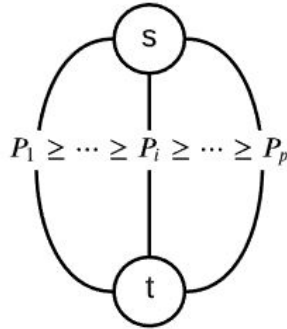


Figure 4: melon graphs

**Theorem 1** *For any melon graph  $G = (P_1, \dots, P_p)$ ,  $tl(G) = \min\{\lceil \frac{lc(G)}{3} \rceil; \max\{\lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil, |P_p|\}\}$ .*

**Proof.** Let us first show the upper bounds in each of the three cases:  $\ell_p = |P_p| \leq \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$  (in which case we aim at proving that  $tl(G) = \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$ );  $\lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil \leq \ell_p \leq \lceil \frac{lc(G)}{3} \rceil$  (in which case  $tl(G) = \ell_p$ ); and  $\lceil \frac{lc(G)}{3} \rceil \leq \ell_p$  (in which case  $tl(G) = \lceil \frac{lc(G)}{3} \rceil$ ).



- First, let us assume that  $\ell_p \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ . Let  $I_1 = \{1 \leq i < p \mid \ell_i > \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil - \ell_p\}$  and let  $I_2 = \{1, \dots, p-1\} \setminus I_1$ . Note that, for any  $i \in I_2$ ,  $\ell_i = |P_i| \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ .

For any  $i \in I_1$ , let  $z_i$  be the vertex of  $P_i$  such that the subpath  $P'_i$  of  $P_i$  from  $x$  to  $z_i$  has length  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil - \ell_p$  and does not pass through  $y$  (possibly  $z_i = x$ ). The path  $P_p \cup P'_i$  going from  $y$  to  $z_i$  and passing through  $x$  has length  $\lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$ . For any  $i \in I_1$ , let  $P''_i = (P_i \setminus P'_i) \cup z_i$  and let  $\gamma_i$  be the "central vertex" of  $P''_i$ , i.e., such that  $d_{P''_i}(\gamma_i, z_i) = \lfloor \frac{|P''_i|}{2} \rfloor$ . Let  $Q_i$  (resp.  $Q'_i$ ) be the subpath of  $P''_i$  going from  $\gamma_i$  to  $z_i$  (resp., to  $y_i$ ). Note that  $|Q_i| \leq |Q'_i| = \lceil \frac{\ell_p + \ell_i - \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil}{2} \rceil \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ .

For any  $i \in I_2$ , let  $z_i = x$  and  $V(P'_i) = \{z_i\}$  and  $P''_i = P_i$ . Then  $Q_i$  and  $Q'_i$  are then defined similarly as above. By definition of  $I_2$ ,  $|Q_i| \leq |Q'_i| \leq |P_i| \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ .

Let us build a tree-decomposition as follows. Start with a bag  $X_0 = V(P_p)$ . For every  $1 \leq i < p$ , add a bag  $X_i^1 = X_0 \cup V(P'_i)$  adjacent to  $X_0$ , then a bag  $C_i = \{z_i, \gamma_i, y\}$  adjacent to  $X_i^1$  and two bags  $X_i^2 = V(Q_i)$  and  $X_i^3 = V(Q'_i)$  both adjacent to  $C_i$ . By previous paragraph, this is a tree-decomposition with length  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$  (see Figure 5).

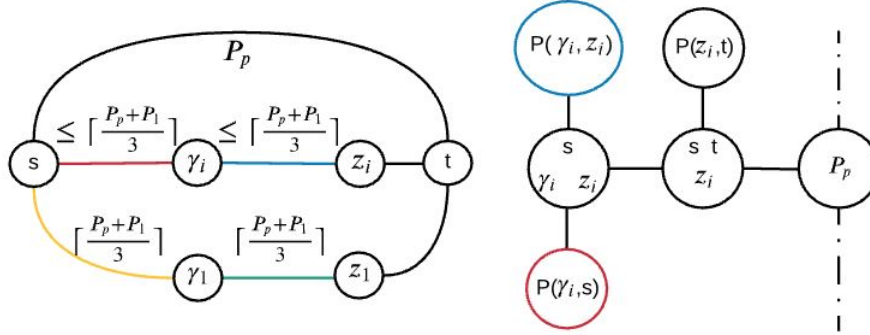


Figure 5: case  $\ell_n \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_n}{3} \rceil$

- Let us assume that  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil \leq \ell_p \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil$ . The tree-decomposition is obtained as in the previous case with the only difference that  $z_i = x$  for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$  (i.e.,  $P'_i = \{z_i\}$  for every  $i$ ). This is a tree-decomposition with length  $\ell_p$  (see Figure 6).

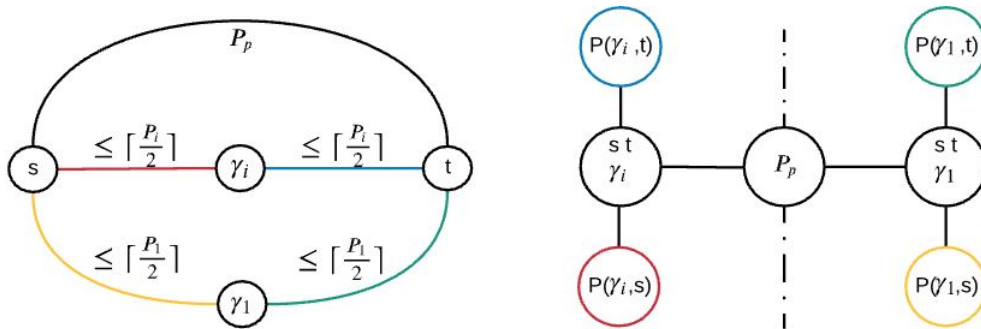


Figure 6: case  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_n}{3} \rceil \leq \ell_n \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil$

- Finally, let us consider the case when  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil < \ell_p$ . For every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ , let  $\gamma_i$  be the vertex of  $P_i$  at distance  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil < \ell_p$  from  $x$  and let  $P'_i$  be the subpath of  $P_i$  which is a shortest path from  $x$  to  $\gamma_i$ . For every  $1 \leq i, j \leq p$ ,  $d_G(\gamma_i, \gamma_j) \leq \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil$  (via the shortest path going through  $y$ ). Let  $Q$  be the subtree induced by  $\{x, \gamma_1, \dots, \gamma_p\}$  and the connected component of  $G \setminus \{x, \gamma_1, \dots, \gamma_p\}$  that contains  $y$ .

Let us build a tree-decomposition as follows. Start with a bag  $X_0 = \{x, \gamma_1, \dots, \gamma_p\}$ . For every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ , add a bag  $X_i = V(P'_i)$  adjacent to  $X_0$ . Finally, add a bag  $X_{p+1} = V(Q)$  adjacent to  $X_0$ . This is a tree-decomposition with length  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil$  (see Figure 7).

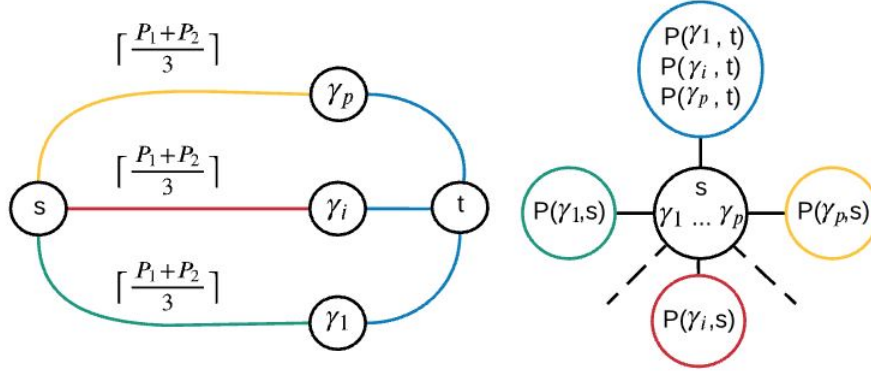


Figure 7: case  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil < \ell_n$

Now, let us prove the lower bounds. By Lemma 1, in all cases,  $tl(G) \geq \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil = \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ . We now prove that, if  $\ell_p > \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$ , then  $tl(G) \geq \min\{\ell_p, \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil\}$ . For purpose of contradiction, let us assume that  $tl(G) < k$  for some  $k \leq \min\{\ell_p, \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil\}$  and consider a tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{B})$  of  $G$  with minimum length. Let  $\alpha$  (resp.  $\beta$ ) be the vertex at distance  $k$  from  $x$  on  $P_1 \setminus y$  (resp. on  $P_2 \setminus y$ ). Note that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are well defined since either  $\ell_1 \geq \ell_2 \geq \ell_p > \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil \geq k$  or  $\lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil \geq \ell_p > \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_p}{3} \rceil$  and so  $\ell_1 \geq \ell_2 > \ell_p \geq k$ . Since  $k \leq \min\{\ell_p, \lceil \frac{\ell_1 + \ell_2}{3} \rceil\}$ ,  $d_G(\alpha, \beta) \geq k$  and therefore, no bag of  $(T, \mathcal{B})$  can contain at least two of  $x, \alpha$  and  $\beta$ . Let  $B_x, B_\alpha$  and  $B_\beta$  be three bags containing  $x, \alpha$  and  $\beta$  respectively. There are several cases to be considered.

- First, let us assume that  $B_x$  is on the path of  $T$  between  $B_\alpha$  and  $B_\beta$ . Therefore,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  must be in different connected components of  $G \setminus B_x$ . Hence,  $B_x$  must contain a vertex of the path from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  going through  $y$  (and not through  $x$ ). Every vertex of this path is at distance at least  $k$  from  $x$ , a contradiction.
- Second, assume that  $B_\alpha$  is on the path of  $T$  between  $B_x$  and  $B_\beta$ . Therefore,  $x$  and  $\beta$  must be in different connected components of  $G \setminus B_\alpha$ . Hence,  $B_\alpha$  must contain a vertex of the path from  $x$  to  $\beta$  not going through  $y$ . Every vertex of this path is at distance at least  $k$  from  $\alpha$ , a contradiction.
- Finally, assume that there is a bag  $B$  such that  $B_x, B_\alpha$  and  $B_\beta$  are each in distinct connected component of  $T \setminus B$ . The set  $B$  must separate  $x, \alpha$  and  $\beta$ . Therefore,  $B$  must contain a vertex in each of the three paths from  $x$  to  $\alpha$  (not going through  $y$ ), from  $x$  to  $\beta$  (not going through  $y$ ) and from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$  going through  $y$  (and not through  $x$ ). Since the cycle  $P_1 \cup P_2$  containing these three vertices has length at least  $3k \leq \ell_1 + \ell_2$  and  $k \leq |P_p| = \ell_p$ , at least two of these three vertices are at distance at least  $k$ , a contradiction.

■

The above result lets think that the treelength of series-parallel graphs cannot be expressed by a “nice” formula (such that in the case of outerplanar graphs). The next subclass of series-parallel graphs (with only four vertices with degree larger than 2, see Figure 8) lets think that the situation is even worse. Let  $p \geq 1$ . Let  $G_p$  be the graph obtained from a cycle of length  $16p$  and let  $a, b, c, d$  be four distinct vertices of it such that  $d(a, b) = d(c, d) = 4p$  and  $d(a, d) = d(b, c) = 2p$ . Then, add one path of length  $8p$  from  $a$  to  $b$  and one path of length  $8p$  from  $c$  to  $d$ . Note that  $is(G) = 12p$ , that its largest cycle has length  $20p$ , all other cycles have length  $16p$  and that its maximal subpaths with internal vertices of degree 2 have length  $2p, 4p$  or  $8p$ . By similar arguments as in previous proof, it can be shown that  $tl(G_p) = 5p$  which seems not directly related to the invariants previously mentioned.

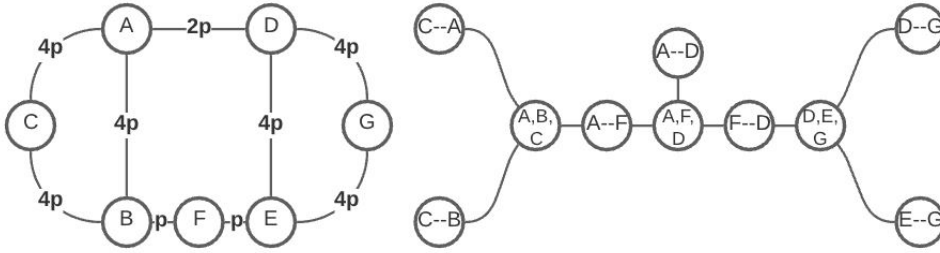


Figure 8: The graph  $G_p$  (left) and a tree-decomposition of length  $5p$  (right)

**Lemma 3** For any  $p \in \mathbb{N}^*$ ,  $tl(G_p) = 5p$ .

**Proof.** Let us build a tree-decomposition as follows (see Figure 8). Start with a bag  $X_0 = \{A, B, C\}$ . Add two bags adjacent to  $X_0$  containing respectively the shortest subpath of  $K$  between  $A$  and  $C$ , and the shortest subpath of  $K$  between  $B$  and  $C$ . Then, add a bag  $X_1$ , adjacent to  $X_0$ , containing the shortest subpath of  $K$  between  $A$  and  $B$ , and the shortest subpath of  $P$  between  $B$  and  $F$  (the diameter of this bag is  $5p$ ). Add the bag  $X_2 = \{A, D, F\}$  adjacent to  $X_1$ . Add a bag, adjacent to  $X_2$ , containing the shortest path from  $A$  to  $D$  (subpath of  $P$ ). Add the bag  $X_3$ , adjacent to  $X_2$ , containing the shortest path (subpath of  $P$ ) from  $D$  to  $F$  (this bag has also diameter  $5a$ ). Then, add the bag  $X_4 = \{D, E, G\}$  adjacent to  $X_3$ . Finally, add the bags, adjacent to  $X_4$ , containing respectively the shortest path from  $D$  to  $G$  in  $Q$ , and from  $E$  to  $G$ . This tree-decomposition has length  $5p$ . To prove the lower bound, let us consider the vertices  $A, F$  and  $G$ . In any tree-decomposition of length  $< 5p$ , no bag can contain at least two of these vertices. Let  $B_A, B_F$  and  $B_G$  be some bags containing respectively  $A, F$  and  $G$  in such a decomposition (that we suppose to exist for purpose of contradiction). There are several cases to be considered.

- First, let us assume that  $B_F$  is on the path of  $T$  between  $B_A$  and  $B_G$ . Therefore,  $A$  and  $G$  must be in different connected components of  $G_p \setminus B_F$ . Hence,  $B_F$  must contain a vertex of the shortest path from  $A$  to  $G$  going through  $D$ . Every vertex of this path is at distance at least  $5p$  from  $F$ , a contradiction.
- Second, assume that  $B_A$  is on the path of  $T$  between  $B_F$  and  $B_G$ . Therefore,  $F$  and  $G$  must be in different connected components of  $G_p \setminus B_A$ . Hence,  $B_A$  must contain a vertex of the shortest path from  $G$  to  $F$  not going through  $E$ . Every vertex of this path is at distance at least  $5p$  from  $A$ , a contradiction.

- Then, assume that  $B_G$  is on the path of  $T$  between  $B_F$  and  $B_A$ . Therefore,  $F$  and  $A$  must be in different connected components of  $G_p \setminus B_G$ . Hence,  $B_G$  must contain a vertex of the shortest path from  $A$  to  $F$  not going through  $B$ . Every vertex of this path is at distance at least  $5p$  from  $G$ , a contradiction.
- Finally, assume that there is a bag  $B_0$  such that  $B_A$ ,  $B_G$  and  $B_F$  are each in distinct connected components of  $T \setminus B_0$ . The set  $B_0$  must separate  $A$ ,  $F$  and  $G$ . There are several cases to be considered.
  - Assume first that  $B_0$  contains a vertex  $v$  of the shortest path between  $B$  and  $A$ .  $B_0$  must also contain a vertex  $u$  of the shortest path from  $G$  to  $A$  (containing  $D$ ). For  $d_G(v, u) < 5p$ , then  $d_G(A, u) \leq a$ . Finally,  $B_0$  must contain a vertex on the shortest path from  $G$  to  $F$  (going through  $E$ ) which are all at distance at least  $5p$  from  $u$ , a contradiction.
  - Otherwise,  $B_0$  must contain a vertex  $v$  of the shortest path from  $B$  to  $A$ .  $B_0$  must also contain a vertex  $u$  of the path between  $A$  and  $G$  (containing  $D$ ) and a vertex  $w$  of the path from  $F$  to  $G$  (through  $E$ ). For  $d_G(u, w) < 5p$ , then  $d_G(A, u) > a$ . For  $d_G(v, u) < 5p$ ,  $v$  must be between  $A$  and  $C$ . Hence  $d_G(v, w) > 5p$ , a contradiction.

■

## 4 Approximation algorithm

This section shows that, even if it is still unknown whether computing the treelength of series-parallel graphs can be done in polynomial time, there exists an efficient approximation algorithm using ear-decompositions.

**Theorem 2** *For any series-parallel graph  $G$ , a tree-decomposition of  $G$  with length at most  $\frac{3}{2} \cdot tl(G)$  can be computed in quadratic time.*

**Proof.** By a remark in Section 2, it is sufficient to consider 2-connected graphs. Let  $G$  be a 2-connected series-parallel graph. It follows from lemma 1 that  $tl(G) \geq \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$ . Let us see how to compute a tree-decomposition of length at most  $\lceil \frac{is(G)}{2} \rceil$ . Intuitively, every bag will consist of a subgraph of an isometric cycle, and so, for every  $x$  and  $y$  in a same bag, they will belong to an isometric cycle  $C$  and  $d_G(x, y) = d_C(x, y) \leq |C|/2 \leq \lfloor \frac{is(G)}{2} \rfloor$ . Let us consider an increasing nested ear decomposition  $\mathcal{E}$  starting with a maximal isometric cycle  $E_0$  for  $G$  (it exists and can be computed in quadratic time by Lemma 2). Let us build the decomposition as follows. Start with a bag containing  $E_0$ . Then, for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$ , let us connect a bag consisting of  $E_i$  to the bag containing  $E_{j_i}$  where  $0 \leq j_i \leq i \leq p$  and  $j_i$  is the minimum index such that  $E_{j_i}$  contains  $a_i$  and  $b_i$ . Recall that  $G_i$  is the subgraph induced by  $E_0, \dots, E_i$ . Since  $\mathcal{E}$  is an increasing nested ear decomposition,  $d_{G_{i-1}}(a_i, b_i) \leq |E_i|$  for every  $1 \leq i \leq p$  and therefore  $V(E_i) \cup P_{G_{i-1}}(a_i, b_i)$  induces an isometric cycle (recall that  $P_{G_{i-1}}(a_i, b_i)$  is any shortest  $a_i, b_i$ -path in  $G_{i-1}$ ). Therefore, the length of the tree-decomposition is at most  $\lfloor \frac{is(G)}{2} \rfloor \leq \lfloor \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil \cdot \frac{3}{2} \rfloor \leq tl(G) \cdot \frac{3}{2}$ . ■

## 5 Characterization of series-parallel graphs with treelength 2

Before stating our main theorem, a last ingredient is required, namely the *Dumbo* graphs. A *Dumbo* graph is any graph built as follows (see Figure 9). Start with a cycle  $C_0 = (v_0, \dots, v_5)$

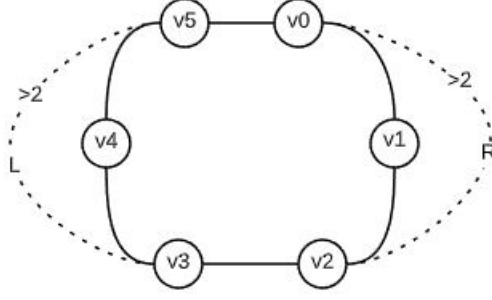


Figure 9: a Dumbo Graph of length 2

of length 6, and add a path  $R$  of length (number of edges) at least 3 between  $v_0$  and  $v_2$  and a path  $L$  of length at least 3 between  $v_3$  and  $v_5$ . Note that a Dumbo graph is series-parallel.

This section is devoted to prove the following theorem which highly relies on the ear-decompositions of series-parallel graphs.

**Theorem 3** *For any series-parallel graph  $G$ ,  $tl(G) \leq 2$  if and only if  $is(G) \leq 6$  and  $G$  does not contain a Dumbo graph as isometric subgraph.*

*Moreover, there is a polynomial algorithm that either computes a tree-decomposition of length at most 2 of  $G$  or exhibits a certificate that  $tl(G) > 2$  (a large isometric cycle or an isometric Dumbo subgraph).*

The “if” part follows from Lemma 1 ( $tl(G) \geq \lceil \frac{is(G)}{3} \rceil$ ) and from the following lemma.

**Lemma 4** *If a series-parallel graph  $G$  contains a Dumbo graph as isometric subgraph, then  $tl(G) > 2$ .*

**Proof.** Let  $G = (V, E)$  be any series-parallel graph containing a Dumbo graph  $D = (C_0, R, L)$  as isometric subgraph. For purpose of contradiction, let us assume that  $G$  admits a tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  of length at most 2. By Lemma 5, there must be a bag  $X \in \mathcal{X}$  containing  $\{v_0, v_2, v_4\}$  or  $\{v_1, v_3, v_5\}$ . By symmetry, let us assume that  $\{v_0, v_2, v_4\} \subseteq X$ . Let  $z$  be a vertex of  $L \setminus \{v_5, v_3\}$  such that  $|dist(z, v_5) - dist(z, v_3)| \leq 1$ . Note that  $dist(z, v_5), dist(z, v_3) \geq 1$  and  $\max\{dist(z, v_5), dist(z, v_3)\} \geq 2$ . Moreover, because  $G$  is series-parallel, every path from  $z$  to  $v_0, v_2$  or  $v_4$  goes through  $v_3$  or  $v_5$  (otherwise, there would be a  $K_4$  minor). Note also that no bag contains  $\{v_0, v_2, v_4, z\}$  since  $z$  is at distance at least 3 from some of  $v_0, v_2, v_4$ .

Let  $Y$  be a bag containing  $z$  that is closest to  $X$ , and let  $X'$  be the bag containing  $v_0, v_2, v_4$  that is closest to  $Y$ . Let  $Z' \notin \{X', Y\}$  be the neighbor of  $X'$  on the path between  $X'$  and  $Y$  in  $T$  and let  $Z = X' \cap Z'$  (or  $Z = X' \cap Y$  if  $X'Y \in E(T)$ ). Note that  $z \notin Z$ . Note also that at least one of  $v_0, v_2$  and  $v_4$  is not in  $Z$  (otherwise, it would contradict either the fact that  $X'$  is closest to  $Y$  or that no bag contains all  $v_0, v_2, v_4$  and  $z$ ). Let  $W = \{v_0, v_2, v_4\} \setminus Z$ . By the properties of tree-decomposition,  $Z$  must separate every  $w \in W$  from  $z$ . There are several cases to be considered depending on which vertex of  $v_0, v_2$  and  $v_4$  are not in  $Z$ :

- If at least  $v_2$  belongs to  $Z$ , then  $W \subseteq \{v_0, v_4\}$ . Hence, there must be  $u$  in the  $z$ - $v_5$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_0$  or  $v_4$  are in  $W$  (i.e in every case) and there must be  $v$  in the  $z$ - $v_3$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_4$  is in  $W$ . Since  $z \notin Z$ ,  $u \neq z$  and  $d(u, v_3) \geq 2$  and then  $d(u, v_2) \geq 3$ . Therefore, there is no tree-decomposition of length 2 with at least  $v_2$  in  $Z$ .

- If at least  $v_0$  belongs to  $Z$ , then  $W \subseteq \{v_2, v_4\}$ . Hence, there must be  $v$  in the  $z$ - $v_3$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_2$  or  $v_4$  are in  $W$  (i.e in every case) and there must be  $u$  in the  $z$ - $v_5$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_4$  is in  $W$ . Since  $z \notin Z$ ,  $v \neq z$  and  $d(v, v_5) \geq 2$  and then  $d(v, v_0) \geq 3$ . Therefore, there is no tree-decomposition of length 2 with at least  $v_0$  in  $Z$ .
- Finally, if at least  $v_4$  belongs to  $Z$ , then  $W \subseteq \{v_0, v_2\}$ . Hence, there must be  $u$  in the  $z$ - $v_5$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_0$  is in  $W$  and there must be  $v$  in the  $z$ - $v_3$  subpath of  $L$  that is in  $Z$  if  $v_2$  is in  $W$ . Since  $z \notin Z$ ,  $v \neq z$ ,  $u \neq z$ ,  $d(u, v_3) \geq 2$  and  $d(v, v_5) \geq 2$  and then  $d(v, v_0) \geq 3$  and  $d(u, v_2) \geq 3$ . Therefore, there is no tree-decomposition of length 2 with at least  $v_4$  in  $Z$ .

■

The “only if” part follows from Lemma 7 whose proof describes the algorithm. Lemma 5 and Lemma 6 will be used in the proof of Lemma 7 to deal with the case of ears of length 2.

Given a graph  $G$  and a tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  of  $G$ . Let  $S$  be any subtree of  $T$ . Let  $G_S$  denote the subgraph of  $G$  induced by  $\{v \in X_t \mid t \in S\}$ .

**Lemma 5** *Let  $G$  be any graph and  $C$  be any isometric cycle of length  $\ell$ . In any tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  of  $G$  with length at most  $\lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil$ , there exists a bag  $X \in \mathcal{X}$  containing three vertices  $a, b, c \in V(C)$  such that  $\lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil = \text{dist}(a, b) \geq \text{dist}(a, c) \geq \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor$  and  $\text{dist}(a, c) \geq \text{dist}(c, b) \geq \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor - 1$ .*

**Proof.** Let  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  be any tree-decomposition of  $G$  of length at most  $\lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil$ . Note that, by Theorem 1,  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  has length exactly  $\lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil$ . Since every edge must appear in some bag, there must be bags containing at least two vertices of  $C$ . For every  $X \in \mathcal{X}$  with  $|X \cap V(C)| \geq 2$ , let  $d(X) = \max_{u, v \in X \cap V(C)} \text{dist}(u, v)$ . Let  $X$  be a bag maximizing  $d(X)$  and  $a, b \in X \cap V(C)$  with  $\text{dist}(a, b) = d(X)$ . Since  $d(X) \leq \text{length}(X)$ , then  $\text{dist}(a, b) \leq \lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil$ . Let  $P$  be the path of  $C$  between  $a$  and  $b$  of length  $\ell - \text{dist}(a, b)$ , and let  $c \in V(P)$  such that  $0 \leq \text{dist}(a, c) - \text{dist}(b, c) \leq 1$ . By definition,  $\text{dist}(a, c), \text{dist}(b, c) \geq \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor$ . If  $c \in X$ , then  $a, b, c$  and  $X$  satisfy the statement with  $\lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil = \text{dist}(a, b) \geq \text{dist}(a, c) \geq \text{dist}(b, c) = \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor$ .

For purpose of contradiction, let us assume that no bag contains  $a, b$  and  $c$ . Let  $Y$  be a bag containing  $c$  (exists by the properties of a tree-decomposition) that is closest to  $X$  in  $T$  and let  $X'$  be a bag containing  $a$  and  $b$  that is closest to  $Y$ . Let  $Z \notin \{X', Y\}$  be any bag on the path between  $X'$  and  $Y$  in  $T$  (or  $Z = X' \cap Y$  if  $X'Y \in E(T)$ ). Note that  $c \notin Z$ . Note also that at least one of  $a$  and  $b$  is not in  $Z$  (otherwise, it would contradict either the fact that  $X'$  is closest to  $Y$  or that no bag contains all  $a, b, c$ ). Without loss of generality, let us assume that  $a \notin Z$ . By the properties of tree-decomposition,  $Z$  must separate  $a$  and  $c$ . Hence, there is a vertex  $u$  between  $a$  and  $c$  in  $P$  that belongs to  $Z$ . If  $u \in X'$ , then  $a, b$  and  $u$  are the required vertices. Indeed, by the maximality of  $\text{dist}(a, b)$ ,  $\text{dist}(a, b) \geq \text{dist}(u, b)$  and so the shortest path between  $u$  and  $b$  in  $C$  goes through  $c$ . Hence  $\text{dist}(u, b) > \text{dist}(b, c) \geq \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor$  and so  $\text{dist}(u, b) = \text{dist}(a, b) = \lceil \frac{\ell}{3} \rceil$  and  $\text{dist}(u, a) = \lfloor \frac{\ell}{3} \rfloor - 1$ .

Let us now assume that  $u \notin X'$ . Let  $e$  be the edge incident to  $X'$  in the path between  $X'$  and  $Y$  in  $T$ . Let  $T_1$  be the component of  $T \setminus e$  containing  $X'$ , and let  $T_2$  be the other component (containing  $Y$ ). Let  $P' = (a = u_0, \dots, u_k = c)$  be the subpath from  $a$  to  $c$  in  $P$  (note that  $u \in P'$ ). Let  $0 \leq i \leq k$  be the smallest integer such that  $u_i \in G_{T_1} \setminus G_{T_2}$  and  $u_{i+1} \in G_{T_2} \setminus G_{T_1}$ . Such an integer exists since  $a \in G_{T_1} \setminus G_{T_2}$  and  $u \in G_{T_2} \setminus G_{T_1}$ . This implies that the edge  $u_i u_{i+1}$  cannot appear in any bag, a contradiction.

■

Some notations are still needed. Let  $G$  be a 2-connected series-parallel graph with a nested increasing ear decomposition  $\mathcal{E} = (E_i)_{0 \leq i \leq p}$  such that  $E_0$  is a largest isometric cycle of  $G$ . Recall

that  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  denote the endpoints of  $E_i$  ( $a_i, b_i \in V(G_{i-1})$ ). Let  $\ell_i = |E_i|$  and  $d_i = d_{G_{i-1}}(a_i, b_i)$ . Since  $\mathcal{E}$  is increasing,  $d_i \leq \ell_i$  for all  $1 \leq i \leq p$ . Finally, for any subgraph  $H$  of  $G$  induced by  $\bigcup_{i' \leq j \leq i} V(E_{j'})$ , let  $\text{Att}(H) \subseteq V(H)$  be the set of vertices of  $H$  that are the attachment vertices ( $a_k$  and  $b_k$ ) of some ear  $E_k$  with  $k > i$ .

**Lemma 6** *Let  $G$  be any 2-connected series-parallel graph without clique-separator, with an increasing nested ear decomposition  $\mathcal{E} = (E_i)_{0 \leq i \leq p}$ . Let  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  be a tree-decomposition, with length at least 2, of the subgraph  $G_j$  of  $G$  induced by  $E_0, \dots, E_j$  and let  $E_i$  be such that  $1 \leq j_i \leq j < i \leq p$  and  $|E_i| = 2$ . Then, there exists a tree-decomposition  $(T, \mathcal{X})$  of  $G_j \cup E_i$  with same length and such that, for every  $B' \in \mathcal{X}'$ , there exists  $B \in \mathcal{X}$  such that  $B' \subseteq B$ .*

**Proof.** Note that by hypothesis, both endpoints of  $E_i$  belong to  $G'$  since they belong to  $E_{j_i}$ . Let us first suppose that the endpoints of  $E_i$  are in a same bag  $B$  of  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$ . Then, the tree-decomposition obtained from  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  by adding a bag  $V(E_i)$  adjacent to  $B$  satisfies the statement of the Lemma.

Let us now consider the case where no bag of  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  contains the endpoints  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  of  $E_i$ . Let  $X \in \mathcal{X}'$  and  $Y \in \mathcal{X}'$  be such that  $a_i \in X$ ,  $b_i \in Y$  and the distance in  $T$  between two such bags is minimum.

Note that, because  $G$  has no edge-separator and because the ears are added in increasing order (i.e.  $2 \leq d_i \leq \ell_i = 2$ ),  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  must have common neighbors in  $G'$ . Note also that, because  $G$  is series-parallel (in particular, the ears are nested) without clique separator, then every common neighbor  $w$  of  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  satisfies  $N(w) = \{a_i, b_i\}$ .

By the tree-decomposition properties, every bag  $W$  on the  $X$ - $Y$  path in  $T'$  must separate  $X \setminus Y$  from  $Y \setminus X$ . In particular,  $N_{G'}(a_i) \cap N_{G'}(b_i) \subseteq W$ . Similarly,  $N_{G'}(a_i) \cap N_{G'}(b_i) \subseteq X$  and  $N_{G'}(a_i) \cap N_{G'}(b_i) \subseteq Y$ . Let  $v$  be the common neighbor of  $a_i$  and  $b_i$  in  $E_i$ . Then, adding  $v$  to every bag  $W$  on the  $X$ - $Y$  path in  $T'$  (including  $X$  and  $Y$ ) gives the desired decomposition. In particular, for every  $v' \in W$ ,  $\text{dist}_G(v', w) = \text{dist}_G(v', v)$  where  $w$  is any vertex in  $N_{G'}(a_i) \cap N_{G'}(b_i)$ , and so the obtained tree-decomposition has same length as  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$ . ■

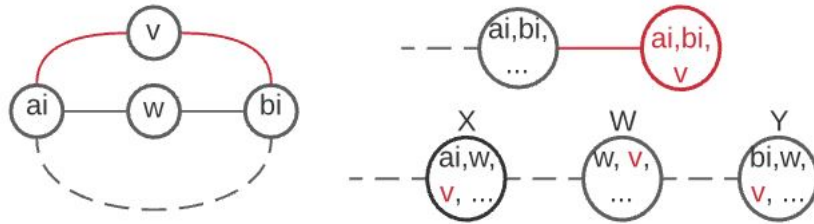


Figure 10: a graph  $G_j \cup E_i$  with  $\ell_i = 2$  (left) and the update of a tree-decomposition of  $G_j$  to a tree-decomposition of  $G_j \cup E_i$  when the endpoints of  $E_i$  are contained in a same bag (right-top) or when they are in different bags (right-bottom) from Lemma 6

**Lemma 7** *Let  $G$  be any (simple) prime series-parallel graph and with  $is(G) \leq 6$ . If  $G$  does not contain a Dumbo graph as isometric subgraph, then  $tl(G) \leq 2$ .*

**Proof.** Let us assume that  $G$  is not a chordal graph in which case the result is trivial (recall that  $tl(G) = 1$  if and only if  $G$  is chordal, which can be decided in linear time). Hence, we may assume that  $tl(G) \geq 2$ .

Let  $G$  be any series-parallel graph without clique-separator, with  $is(G) \leq 6$ , and with no Dumbo graph as isometric subgraph. Let  $\mathcal{E} = (E_i)_{0 \leq i \leq p}$  be an increasing nested ear-decomposition of  $G$  with  $E_0$  being a largest isometric cycle. Note that  $\mathcal{E}$  contains no ear of length one since  $G$  is simple, series-parallel and prime .

We will build a sequence  $\mathcal{E}_1 \subset \mathcal{E}_2 \subset \dots \subset \mathcal{E}_{p'} = \mathcal{E}$  such that  $E_0 \in \mathcal{E}_1$  and for every  $1 \leq i \leq p'$ ,

1.  $G^i = G[\bigcup_{E \in \mathcal{E}_i} V(E)]$  is an isometric series-parallel subgraph of  $G$  with  $\mathcal{E}_i$  as ear-decomposition;
2. There are no ears of length two is attached to  $G^i$ , i.e., every ear of  $\mathcal{E}$  not yet in  $G^i$  with both endpoints in  $G^i$  has length at least 3;
3.  $G^i$  admits a tree-decomposition  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  of length 2, and
4. For every ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}_i$  attached to  $G^i$ , there exists  $t \in V(T^i)$  such that  $\{a_j, b_j\} \subseteq X_t^i \in \mathcal{X}^i$ , i.e., every ear not yet in  $G^i$  with both endpoints in  $G^i$  (so with length at least 3) has both its endpoints in some bag of  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$ .

The proof is by induction on  $1 \leq i \leq p'$ . The base case consists in building  $\mathcal{E}_1$ . There are several cases depending of the size of  $E_0$ ,  $4 \leq \ell_0 \leq 6$  ( $|E_0| = \ell_0 > 3$  since  $G$  is not chordal). Let us first build  $\mathcal{E}_1$ . There are several cases depending of the size of  $E_0$ .

- If  $E_0 = (a, b, c, d)$  has length 4 (it cannot have length 3 since  $G$  is not chordal), recall that since  $G$  is series-parallel, the ears are nested, there cannot be an ear attached to  $a$  and  $c$  and an ear attached to  $b$  and  $d$ . Indeed, since  $G$  has no clique separator, no ear can be attached to two adjacent vertices and every ear attached to  $E_0$  has a length 2 (else  $is(G) > 4$ ). Then, up to symmetries,  $Att(E_0) = \{a, c\}$  (if  $Att(E_0) = \emptyset$ , then  $G = E_0$  and the result is trivial) (see Figure 11). Let  $\mathcal{E}_1$  consist of  $E_0$  and the set of all ears of length

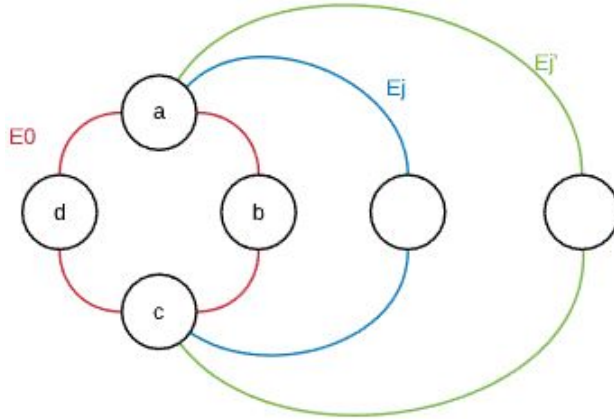


Figure 11: case where  $E_0$  has length 4

two attached to  $a$  and  $c$ . Then,  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$  is the tree-decomposition with one "central" bag  $\{a, b, c, d\}$  with one neighbouring bag  $E_j$  for every ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E}_1 \setminus \{E_0\}$  (see Figure 12).  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$  is clearly a tree-decomposition of  $G^1$  with length 2. Finally, because the ears are nested and there are no clique separators, every ear in  $\mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}_1$  with attachment vertices in  $G^1$  must have  $a$  and  $c$  as attachment vertices. If such an ear in  $\mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}_1$  exists, it must have length at least 3 which would contradict the fact that  $E_0$  is a largest isometric cycle. Hence, no such ear exists and  $G^1 = G$ .



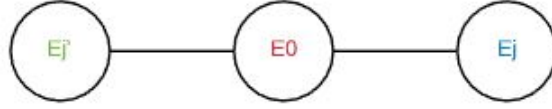


Figure 12: Tree-decomposition of  $G$  when  $E_0$  has length 4

- If  $E_0 = (a, b, c, d, e)$  has length 5 then, up to symmetries,  $Att(E_0) \subseteq \{a, c, d\}$  (if  $Att(E_0) = \emptyset$ , then  $G = E_0$  and the result is trivial). More precisely, ears can be attached to  $a$  and  $c$  or to  $a$  and  $d$ . Indeed, since  $G$  has no clique separator, no ear can be attached to two adjacent vertices (see Figure 13). Let  $\mathcal{E}_1$  consist of  $E_0$  and the set of all ears of length

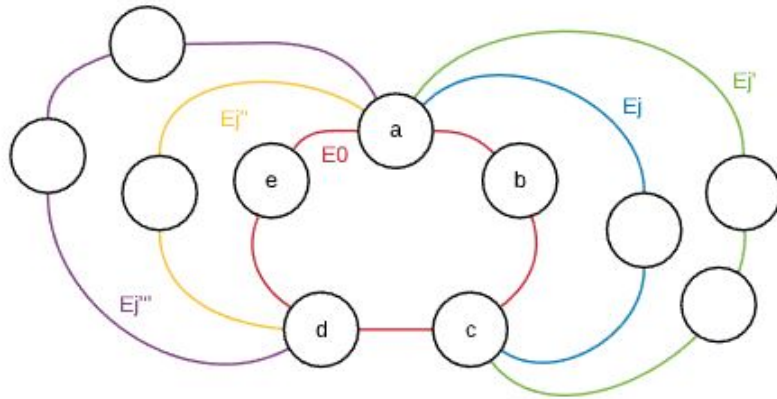


Figure 13: case where  $E_0$  has length 5 ( $E_j$  and  $E_j''$  are contained in a bag since they have length 2.  $E_j'$  and  $E_j'''$  are not contained in a bag since they have length 3)

two attached to  $E_0$ . Then,  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$  is the tree-decomposition with one "central" bag  $\{a, b, c, d, e\}$  with one neighbouring bag  $E_j$  for every ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E}_1 \setminus \{E_0\}$  (see Figure 14).  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$  is clearly a tree-decomposition of  $G^1$  with length 2. Finally, every ear in  $\mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}_1$  attached to  $G^1$  has its attachment vertices in  $E_0$  because  $G$  is series-parallel and so, the ears are nested. More precisely, otherwise, since an ear cannot have adjacent attachment vertices (no clique separator), there would be an ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}_1$  and one ear  $E_k \in \mathcal{E}_1 \setminus \{E_0\}$  (w.l.o.g., say with attachment vertices  $a$  and  $c$ ) with  $a_j \in E_k \setminus \{a, c\}$  and  $b_j \notin \{a, c\}$ . This would imply that  $G$  contains a  $K_4$  as minor, a contradiction.

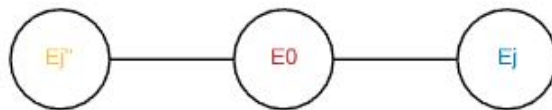


Figure 14: Tree-decomposition of  $\mathcal{E}_1$  when  $E_0$  has length 5 ( $E_j$  and  $E_j''$  are contained in a bag since they have length 2.  $E_j'$  and  $E_j'''$  are not contained in a bag since they have length 3)

- Then, let us consider the case when  $E_0 = (a, b, c, d, e, f)$  has length 6. If there is an ear attached to two vertices at distance 3, note that every such ear has length exactly 3 since  $E_0$  is a largest isometric cycle. Moreover, all such ears have the same attachment vertices since the ears are nested (otherwise, there would be a  $K_4$  minor). W.l.o.g., let  $a$  and  $d$  be

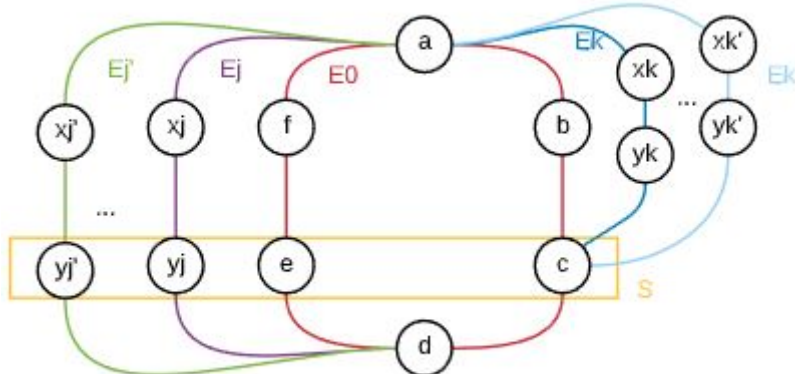


Figure 15: case where  $E_0$  has length 6

the attachment vertices of all (if any) ears attached to vertices at distance 3 in  $E_0$ . Let  $\mathcal{E}'_1$  consists of  $E_0$  and all ears  $E_j = (a_j = a, x_j, y_j, b_j = d)$  attached to  $a$  and  $d$ . Since  $G$  has no Dumbo graph as isometric subgraph, there are no two ears  $X, Y \in \mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}'_1$  of length at least three such that  $X$  is attached to  $a$  and  $c$  (resp.,  $e$ ) or to  $a$  and  $y_j$  for some ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E}'_1$  and  $Y$  is attached to  $d$  and  $f$  (resp.  $b$ ) or to  $d$  and  $x_k$  for some ear  $E_k \in \mathcal{E}'_1$ . Therefore, w.l.o.g., all ears of length at least 3 that are attached to  $G' = G[\bigcup_{E \in \mathcal{E}'_1} V(E)]$  have  $a$  and some vertex in  $B = \{c, e\} \cup \bigcup_{E_j \in \mathcal{E}'_1} \{y_j\}$  as attachment vertices (see Figure 15). Let  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  be the tree-decomposition with one “central” bag  $C = B \cup \{a\}$  with one neighbouring bag  $\{a, x_j, y_j\}$  for every ear  $E_j \in \mathcal{E}'_1 \setminus \{E_0\}$ , one neighbouring bag  $\{a, b, c\}$ , one neighbouring bag  $\{a, f, e\}$ , and one neighbouring bag  $\{d\} \cup B$ . Then,  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  is clearly a tree-decomposition of  $G'$  of length 2 such that all ears of length at least 3 attached to  $G'$  have their attachment vertices in  $C$ . Finally, let  $F$  be the set of all ears of length 2 attached to  $G'$ . Let  $\mathcal{E}_1 = \mathcal{E}'_1 \cup F$ . By Lemma 6, from  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$ , we can obtain a tree-decomposition  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$  of  $G^1$  of length 2 such that every bag in  $\mathcal{X}'$  is contained in some bag of  $\mathcal{X}^1$  (see Figure 16).

Finally, since  $G$  has no clique separator and is series-parallel (in particular the ears are nested), every ear attached to  $G^1$  must have both its attachment vertices in a same bag of  $(T^1, \mathcal{X}^1)$ , and must have length at least 3 (since otherwise it would have been included in  $\mathcal{E}_1$ ).

Now, let's prove by induction on  $1 \leq i < p'$  that we can build an ear decomposition  $\mathcal{E}_{i+1}$  from  $\mathcal{E}_i$  with all the desired properties. Let  $E_j$  be any shortest ear not in  $\mathcal{E}_i$  with attachment vertices  $\{a_j, b_j\} \in V(G^i)$ . Because  $G$  has no clique separator and, by the induction hypothesis,  $G^i$  has a tree-decomposition  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  of length 2 with a bag containing  $a_j$  and  $b_j$ , note that  $d_j = \text{dist}_G(a_j, b_j) = \text{dist}_{G^i}(a_j, b_j) = 2$ . Moreover, because  $is(G) = 6$  and that there is no ear of length two attached to  $G^i$ , the length  $\ell_j$  of  $E_j$  is such that  $3 \leq \ell_j \leq 4$ . There are two cases depending of the length of  $E_j$ .

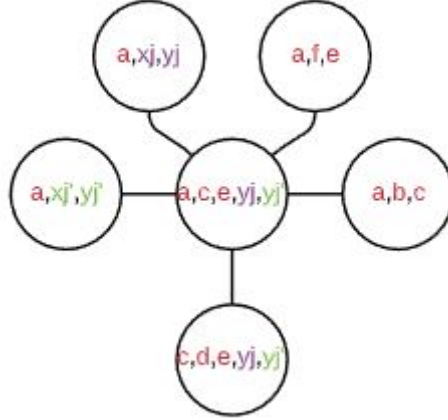


Figure 16: Tree-decomposition of  $\mathcal{E}_1$  when  $E_0$  has length 6

- If  $E_j = (a_j, x, y, b_j)$  has length 3, then up to symmetries  $Att(G^i \cup E_j) \cap V(E_j) \subseteq \{a_j, y, b_j\}$ . Indeed, since  $G$  has no clique separator, no ear can be attached to two adjacent vertices and since all ears of  $\mathcal{E}$  are nested, there isn't an ear attached to  $a_j$  and  $y$  and another one to  $x$  and  $b_j$ , or an ear attached to a vertex of  $V(E_j) \setminus \{a_j, b_j\}$  and to a vertex of  $V(G_i) \setminus \{a_j, b_j\}$  (see Figure 17). Let  $\mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  consist of  $\mathcal{E}_i$  and  $E_j$ . Let  $G' = G[\bigcup_{E \in \mathcal{E}'_{i+1}} V(E)]$  and  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  be the tree-decomposition build from  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  with a bag  $B = \{a_j, x, y, b_j\}$  connected to a bag of  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  containing  $a_j$  and  $b_j$ . Then,  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  is clearly a tree-decomposition of  $G'$  of length 2. Finally, let  $F$  be the set of all ears of length 2 attached to  $G'$  (note that, because of the induction hypothesis and the fact that the initial ear decomposition is increasing, all such ears are attached to  $a_j$  and  $y$ ). Let  $\mathcal{E}_{i+1} = \mathcal{E}'_{i+1} \cup F$ . By Lemma 6, from  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$ , we can obtain a tree-decomposition  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$  of  $G^{i+1}$  of length 2 such that every bag of  $\mathcal{X}'$  is contained in some bag of  $\mathcal{X}^{i+1}$  (see Figure 17). Clearly if there is an ear attached to the only middle vertex of an ear  $E_f$  of  $F$  then by definition of a nested ear decomposition, it's second endpoint is a vertex in  $E_f$  which contradicts the fact that  $G$  has no clique-separator. We can deduce that for every  $E_m$  attached to  $G^{i+1}$  there exists  $t \in V(T^{i+1})$  such that  $\{a_m, b_m\} \subseteq X_t^{i+1}$ .

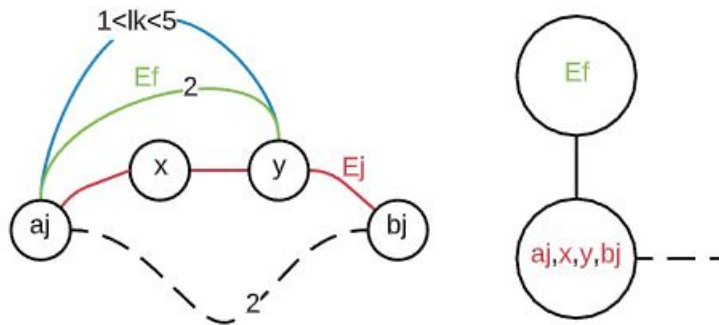


Figure 17: case where  $E_j$  has length 3

- Now, let us assume that  $E_j = (a_j, x, y, z, b_j)$  has length 4. There are several cases depending of the vertices of  $E_j$  that are attachment vertices for other ears  $E_l$  in  $\mathcal{E} \setminus (\mathcal{E}_i \cup \{E_j\})$  attached to  $E_j$ . Because  $G$  has no clique separator and  $\mathcal{E}$  is an increasing nested ear decomposition, we have these following possibilities up to symmetries.

- If  $\text{Att}(E_j) \subseteq \{a_j, y, b_j\}$ , (see Figure 18), then let  $\mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  consist of  $\mathcal{E}_i$  and  $E_j$ . Let  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  be the tree-decomposition of  $G' = G[\bigcup_{E \in \mathcal{E}'_{i+1}} V(E)]$  built from  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  as follows. Let  $B$  be any bag of  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  containing both  $a_j$  and  $b_j$  (exists by the induction hypothesis). Let us add the bag  $\{a_j, y, b_j\}$  adjacent to  $B$  and to the bags  $\{a_j, x, y\}$  and  $\{y, z, b_j\}$ . Since  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  is a tree-decomposition of  $G^i$  of length 2, then  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  is also a tree-decomposition of  $G'$  of length 2. Let  $F$  be the set of ears of length 2 attached to  $E_j$  and let  $\mathcal{E}_{i+1}$  consist of  $\mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  and  $F$ . By lemma 6, we can obtain from  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  a tree-decomposition  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$  of length 2 of  $G^{i+1}$ . Finally,  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$  satisfies the desired properties (in particular because  $G$  has no edge separator, every ear attached to  $G^{i+1}$  has its attachment vertices in a bag of  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$ ).

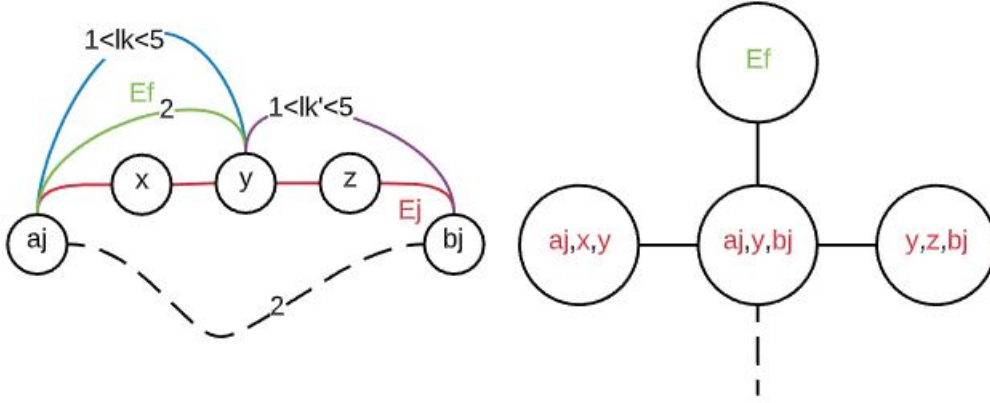


Figure 18: case where  $E_j$  has length 4 and  $\text{Att}(E_j) \subseteq \{a_j, y, b_j\}$

- Now, let us assume, up to symmetry, that there exists an ear  $E'$  attached to  $a_j$  and  $z$ . Note that such an ear has length exactly 3 since  $\mathcal{E}$  is an increasing nested ear decomposition and no isometric cycle has length more than 6. Let  $\mathcal{E}'$  be the set of all ears  $E_{j'} = (a_j = a_{j'}, x_{j'}, y_{j'}, b_{j'} = z) \notin \mathcal{E}_i$  of length 3 attached to  $a_j$  and  $z$  (in particular,  $E'$  is such an ear), and let  $\mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  consist of  $\mathcal{E}_i \cup E_j \cup \mathcal{E}'$ . (see Figure 19). Let us first show that no ear  $E_q \in \mathcal{E} \setminus \mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  of length at least 3 is attached to  $x_{j'}$  and  $b_{j'}$  for some  $j'$  such that  $E_{j'} \in \mathcal{E}'$  (resp. to  $x$  and  $z$ ). For purpose of contradiction, let us assume that such an ear  $E_q$  exists. Recall that, by the induction hypothesis,  $a_j$  and  $b_j$  must belong to a same bag of  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  of length 2 and that, because there is no clique separator,  $a_j, b_j \notin E(G)$ . Hence,  $\text{dist}_G(a_j, b_j) = \text{dist}_{G^i}(a_j, b_j) = 2$ . Let  $E_\ell$  be the first (i.e., with minimum  $\ell$ ) ear of  $G^i$  containing both  $a_j$  and  $b_j$  (such an ear must exist since  $E_j$  can only be attached to the vertices of some previous ear).
  - \* If  $E_\ell = E_0$ , then, the subgraph induced by  $V(E_0) \cup V(E_{j'}) \cup V(E_q)$  (resp.  $V(E_0) \cup V(E_j) \cup V(E_q)$ ) is an isometric Dumbo graph, a contradiction.
  - \* Otherwise (if  $\ell \neq 0$ ), let  $a_\ell$  and  $b_\ell$  be the end points of  $E_\ell$ , and let  $G^*$  be the subgraph induced by the vertices of the ears in  $\{E_m \in \mathcal{E}^i \mid m < \ell\}$ . Note that

$G^*$  is an isometric subgraph of  $G^i$ . W.l.o.g.,  $a_\ell \notin \{a_j, b_j\}$  (otherwise this would contradict that  $E_\ell$  is the first ear in which both  $a_j$  and  $b_j$  appear). Let  $P$  be any shortest  $a_\ell$ - $b_\ell$  path in  $G^*$ . Since  $a_\ell$  and  $b_\ell$  are not adjacent (otherwise there would be an edge separator in  $G$ ),  $P$  has length at least 2. Then, the subgraph induced by  $V(P) \cup V(E_\ell) \cup V(E_{j'}) \cup V(E_q)$  (resp.  $V(P) \cup V(E_\ell) \cup V(E_j) \cup V(E_q)$ ) is an isometric Dumbo graph, a contradiction.

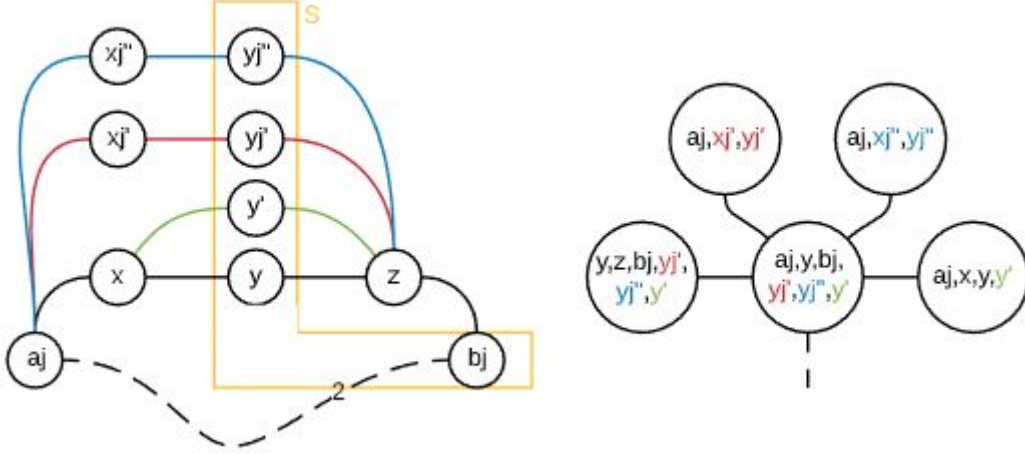


Figure 19: case where  $E_j$  has length 4 and there is at least one ear attached to  $a_j$  and  $z$

Let  $B$  be any bag of  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  containing both  $a_j$  and  $b_j$  (exists by the induction hypothesis). Let  $B' = \{a_j, b_j, y\} \cup_{j', E_{j'} \in \mathcal{E}'} \{y_{j'}\}$ , let  $B_{j'} = \{a_j, x_{j'}, y_{j'}\}$  for all  $j'$  such that  $E_{j'} \in \mathcal{E}'$ , let  $B'' = \{b_j, z, y\} \cup_{j', E_{j'} \in \mathcal{E}'} \{y_{j'}\}$ , and let  $B_j = \{a_j, x, y\}$ .

Let  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  be the tree-decomposition of  $G' = G[\cup_{E \in \mathcal{E}'_{i+1}} V(E)]$  built from  $(T^i, \mathcal{X}^i)$  by adding the bag  $B'$  adjacent to  $B$ , to  $B''$ , to  $B_j$  and to  $B_{j'}$  for all  $j'$  such that  $E_{j'} \in \mathcal{E}'$ . It can be shown that  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  is a tree-decomposition of  $G'$ , with length 2 and such that every ear of length at least 3 attached to  $G'$  has both its attachment vertices in some bag of  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$ . Let  $F$  be the set of ears of length 2 attached to some ear in  $\mathcal{E}' \cup E_j$  and let  $\mathcal{E}_{i+1}$  consist of  $\mathcal{E}'_{i+1}$  union  $F$ . By lemma 6, we can obtain from  $(T', \mathcal{X}')$  a tree-decomposition  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$  of length 2 of  $G^{i+1}$ .

Finally,  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$  satisfies the desired properties (in particular because  $G$  has no edge separator, every ear attached to  $G^{i+1}$  has its attachment vertices in a bag of  $(T^{i+1}, \mathcal{X}^{i+1})$ ). ■

## 6 Further work

This work presents the first characterization of the treelength of a class of graphs in terms of forbidden isometric subgraphs. In particular, we show that deciding if the treelength of a series-parallel graph is at most 2 can be done in polynomial time while this problem is NP-complete in general graphs. Our approach seems difficult to generalize to larger values of the treelength. Indeed, for treelength 3, we have already identified about 20 infinite families of forbidden isometric subgraphs. All these families are slight variations of the Dumbo graphs but

we still do not know how to describe them in a synthetic way. The next step is then to find a polynomial-time algorithm that computes the treelength of series-parallel graphs (or to prove that it is an NP-hard problem). The main goal is to further investigate the computational complexity of computing the treelength (or even the treewidth) of planar graphs. Designing better approximation algorithms for general or planar or series-parallel graphs is also an interesting open problem.

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