

A REVERSE SIERPIŃSKI NUMBER PROBLEM

DAN KRYWARUCZENKO

ABSTRACT. A generalized Sierpiński number base b is an integer $k > 1$ for which $\gcd(k+1, b-1) = 1$, k is not a rational power of b , and $k \cdot b^n + 1$ is composite for all $n > 0$. Given an integer $k > 0$, we will seek a base b for which k is a generalized Sierpiński number base b . We will show that this is not possible if k is a Mersenne number. We will give an algorithm which will work for all other k provided that there exists a composite in the sequence $\{(k^{2^m} + 1) / \gcd(k+1, 2)\}_{m=0}^{\infty}$.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Sierpiński number $k > 0$ is an odd number such that $k \cdot 2^n + 1$ is composite for all integers $n > 0$. Waclaw Sierpiński, in 1960, proved that there are infinitely many such numbers [12] but found no exact values. (This is a dual of a problem of Euler that Erdős solved in 1950 [6].) In 1962 John Selfridge discovered what may be the smallest Sierpiński number, 78,557. He showed that each term in the sequence $78557 \cdot 2^n + 1$ is divisible by one of the primes in the covering set $\{3, 5, 7, 13, 19, 37, 73\}$. After 45 years of computing there remains only 6 possible numbers less than 78,557 that must be eliminated to prove this is true [9].

In our previous paper [1], we extended the definition of Sierpiński numbers to include other bases (as below) and found Sierpiński numbers for each of the bases $2 \leq b \leq 100$. We proved that for 33 of the bases, these were the least possible Sierpiński numbers.

Definition 1.1. A **Sierpiński number base** b is an integer $k > 1$ for which $\gcd(k+1, b-1) = 1$, k is not a rational power of b , and $k \cdot b^n + 1$ is composite for all $n > 0$.

The gcd condition is to avoid having a single prime which divides every term of the sequence; these are called trivial covers (or 1-covers). The rational power condition avoids numbers of the form $b^{2^n} + 1$, the generalized Fermat numbers. Some researchers do not exclude these and instead exclude those k which allow polynomial factorization [8]. Others have generalized the notion of Sierpiński numbers by altering the conditions on k without changing the base b [11, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7].

Key words and phrases. Sierpiński number, covering set, generalized Fermat number, Mersenne number.

This research was completed at the University of Tennessee at Martin under the direction of Dr. Chris K. Caldwell.

Definition 1.2. A **cover** for the sequence $k \cdot b^n + 1$ ($n > 0$) is a finite set of primes $S = \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_m\}$ for which each element of the sequence is divisible by a prime in S . S is called a **N-cover** if N is the least positive integer for which each prime in S divides $k \cdot b^n + 1$ if and only if it divides $k \cdot b^{n+N} + 1$. We will call this integer N the **period of the cover** S .

In our previous paper we showed that every integer base $b > 1$ admitted a Sierpiński number k . In this paper we will reverse the problem and ask for each integer $k > 1$ is there a base b for which k is a Sierpiński number.

Using a program to find Sierpiński numbers for small bases [1] we found that every positive integer less than 3000 is a Sierpiński number (with a cover with period dividing 5040) for some base less than 10,000,000 except for $k = 2, 3, 5, 7, 15, 31, 63, 65, 127, 255, 511, 1023$, and 2047.

A Mersenne is a number of the form $2^m - 1$ where (e.g., $2^8 - 1$). We will show that when k is a Mersenne number, $k \cdot b^n + 1$ can not have a non-trivial cover. Most Sierpiński numbers arise through covers, though it is also possible for them to arise by algebraic factorization or a combination of the two [1]. But it is very unlikely that such factorizations arise when k is a Mersenne [8, 10]. Once we eliminate the Mersenne numbers from the list above we are left with 2, 5, and 65.

It was conjectured that there is no base which makes 2 a Sierpiński number [13]. We will find bases for which 2, 5, and 65 are Sierpiński numbers, and then characterize those k which cannot be Sierpiński numbers.

2. PRELIMINARY THEOREMS

Theorem 2.1. *Suppose $k \cdot b^n + 1$ has a cover S with period N . Then each prime in S divides $(-k)^N - 1$ and $b^N - 1$.*

Proof. Let S be such a cover and let $p \in S$. Then p divides $k \cdot b^n + 1$ for some n with $1 \leq n \leq N$. Since N is our period and $p \in S$ we know p divides $k \cdot b^n + 1$, $k \cdot b^{n+N} + 1$, and their difference $k \cdot b^n(b^N - 1)$, but does not divide $k \cdot b^n$. So $b^N \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$. Now $k \cdot b^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ so $k \equiv -b^{-n} \pmod{p}$ and $(-k)^N \equiv (b^{-n})^N \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$. \square

Notice 2 cannot be a member of a non-trivial cover because if 2 divides $k \cdot b^n + 1$ and 2 divides $b^N - 1$, then 2 divides $\gcd(b - 1, k + 1)$.

Theorem 2.2. *If k is a Mersenne number and $n \geq 0$, then $k \cdot b^n + 1$ cannot have a non-trivial cover.*

Proof. We will prove the contrapositive. Let S be a non-trivial cover of $k \cdot b^n + 1$ with period N . Then there is some odd prime $p \in S$ which divides $k \cdot b^N + 1$. By the previous theorem, $b^N \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$, so p divides $k + 1$. This means $k + 1$ has an odd prime divisor. Therefore, $k + 1$ is not a power of 2. \square

These theorem suggests the following approach to finding a base b which makes k a Sierpiński number. First, select a period N for the cover. Then

factor $(-k)^N - 1$. Using each of its prime divisors p , we would find a specific b value such that p divides $b^N - 1$, but not $b - 1$, and p divides $k \cdot b^n + 1$ for some $n < N$. If this is possible, then a list could be formed showing the specific b values and n values satisfying the requirements for each prime. After repeating this for each prime, determine whether there is a set of bases and primes such that the entire set of N terms would be covered. If so, we then solve the problem by using the Chinese Remainder Theorem.

We used this method to solve for b when $k = 12$. We have $(-12)^6 - 1 = 7 \cdot 11 \cdot 13 \cdot 19 \cdot 157$. Using the primes 7, 13, and 19 coupled respectively with base residues 4, 3, and 7 for b , the Chinese Remainder Theorem gave the result $b = 900$. The primes in the cover $\{7, 13, 19\}$ divide the sequence of terms $12 \cdot 900^n + 1$ with period 3 in the following pattern.

$$\underbrace{7, 19, 13}, \underbrace{7, 19, 13}, \dots$$

However, with $k = 2$ we ran into difficulties. The approach appeared to fail for all periods $N \leq 60$. For example, when we set our period at 60 (a smooth number which is likely to yield results), we cover either $2 \cdot b^{15} + 1$ or $2 \cdot b^{45} + 1$ but not both. When we set the period at 48, this process would fail at one of these specific n values: $\{3, 9, 17, 15, 21, 27, 33, 39, 41, 45\}$. The key problem is that $k \cdot b^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ may be impossible to solve for a certain k , n , and p ; so we will give an alternative approach in the next section.

3. PERIOD LENGTH A POWER OF TWO

We need a few more results before we present our alternate method.

Theorem 3.1. *If $n > m \geq 0$, then $\gcd(k^{2^m} + 1, k^{2^n} + 1) = \gcd(k + 1, 2)$.*

Proof. Note $k^{2^m} + 1$ is one of the terms on the left of

$$(k - 1)(k + 1)(k^2 + 1) \cdot \dots \cdot (k^{2^{n-1}} + 1) = k^{2^n} - 1 = (k^{2^n} + 1) - 2,$$

so $\gcd(k^{2^m} + 1, k^{2^n} + 1)$ divides 2. If k is even then the greatest common divisor is one; otherwise it is 2. \square

Theorem 3.2. *If $n > 0$ and $k > 1$, then $k^{2^n} + 1$ has an odd prime factor.*

Proof. If k is even, then $k^{2^n} + 1$ is an odd number greater than 1, so we are done. If instead k is odd, then $\gcd(k^{2^n} + 1, 4) = 2$ and $(k^{2^n} + 1)/2$ is an odd number greater than or equal to 5, so again it has an odd prime factor. \square

Theorem 3.3. *Let p be an odd prime which divides $k^{2^m} + 1$ for some fixed integer $m > 0$. For all odd integers n it is possible to solve $k \cdot b^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ for a solution $b = (-k)^j$. This solution satisfies $k \cdot b^M + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ if and only if $\text{ord}_p(b)$ divides $M - n$.*

Proof. Let $m > 0$. From what we are given $(-k)^{2^m} \equiv -1 \pmod{p}$, hence $(-k)^{2^{m+1}} \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$. So we know $-k$ has order 2^{m+1} modulo p . To solve $k \cdot b^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$ for b , let $b = (-k)^j$ for some $j \geq 0$ and solve

$(-k)^{j \cdot n + 1} \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$. It is sufficient to solve $j \cdot n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{\text{ord}_p(-k)}$ which is possible because n and the order of $-k \pmod{p}$ are relatively prime. Note that j must be odd, so the solution b has order 2^{m+1} also. \square

We are now able to present our new approach as Algorithm 1.

Algorithm 1: Find b so that k is a Sierpiński number base b

```

1  input  $k > 1$ 
2  if  $k$  is a Mersenne number then
3    |   return “[probably] not possible”
4  else
5    |    $m \leftarrow -1$ 
6    |   repeat
7    |     |    $m \leftarrow m + 1$ 
8    |     |    $p_m \leftarrow$  the least odd prime which divides  $k^{2^m} + 1$ 
9    |     |    $n \leftarrow 2^m + 1$ 
10   |     |   solve  $k \cdot b_m^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p_m}$  for  $b_m$ 
11   |     until  $m > 0$  and there is another odd prime which divides
12   |     |    $k^{2^m} + 1$ 
13   |     |   call this second prime  $p_{m+1}$ 
14   |     |   define  $b_{m+1}$  by  $k \cdot b_{m+1} + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p_{m+1}}$ 
15   |     |   find  $b$  so that  $b \equiv b_i \pmod{p_i}$  for  $0 \leq i \leq m + 1$ , and
16   |     |    $\text{gcd}(k + 1, b - 1) = 1$ 
17   |     |   return base  $b$ , cover  $S = \{p_0, p_1, \dots, p_{m+1}\}$ , period  $2^{m+1}$ 
18   endif

```

Theorem 3.4. *Suppose $k > 1$ is not a Mersenne number. If there is a term in the sequence*

$$(3.1) \quad \{(k^{2^m} + 1) / \text{gcd}(k + 1, 2)\} \quad (m > 0)$$

divisible by at least two distinct primes, then Algorithm 1 will find a base b for which k is a Sierpiński number.

Before we present the proof, we will illustrate the use of this algorithm with $k = 2$. After the first time through the loop (steps 6 through 11), $m = 0$, $p_0 = 3$, $n = 2$, and $b_0 \equiv 2 \pmod{3}$. So after we solve for $b \equiv b_0$, 3 will divide the second term of the sequence $k \cdot b^v + 1$ for $v = \{1, 2, \dots\}$ and every other term because b has period 2 modulo 3. This prime begins our cover and at this stage the pattern with which the primes in the cover divides the terms $k \cdot b^v + 1$ for $v = \{1, 2, \dots\}$ and looks like the following:

$$\underbrace{\quad, 3, \quad, 3, \dots}$$

That is, 3 divides $2 \cdot b^v + 1$ for $v = 2, 4, 6, \dots$

After the second time through the loop, $m = 1$, $p_1 = 5$, $n = 3$, and $b_1 \equiv 3 \pmod{5}$. So 5 divides the third term and then every fourth because $2^{1+1} = 4$ is the period of $b_1 \pmod{p_1}$ by Theorem 3.3. So our divisibility pattern now looks like:

$$\underbrace{--, 3, 5, 3}, \underbrace{--, 3, 5, 3}, \dots$$

After the third time through $p_2 = 17$ and b_2 has order 8, so we now have a pattern with period 2^3

$$\underbrace{--, 3, 5, 3, 17, 3, 5, 3}, \underbrace{--, 3, 5, 3, 17, 3, 5, 3}, \dots$$

The primes for iterations four and five are 257 and 65537 see (Table 1), leaving a pattern with period 2^5 .

Notice that each time through the loop the period doubles; however, since we have added just one prime to each stop we are still left with one hole. If we were to ever get a case in which there were two odd primes dividing $k^{2^m} + 1$ then we can fill in that hole! In our example, it is the sixth iteration in which this first occurs (when $2^{2^5} + 1 = 641 \cdot 6700417$), so we double the period again but we can also now fill in the last hole. Finally, we solve for b using the Chinese Remainder Theorem. Thus, when $k = 2$, we find $b = 16979062410086072498$ and the cover $\{3, 5, 17, 257, 641, 65537, 6700417\}$ that repeats with period 64.

Similarly, with $k = 5$, we find $b = 140324348$ and the cover $\{3, 13, 17, 313, 11489\}$ with a period of 16. Finally, for $k = 65$, $b = 19030688904264$ with cover $\{3, 17, 113, 2113, 8925313\}$ with a period of 16.

Proof of Theorem 3.4. The algorithm starts with an input $k > 1$. If k is a Mersenne number, the algorithm throws it out because of Theorem 2.2. Next, we start the loop with $m = 0$, and find the least odd prime p_0 that divides $k + 1$ (we know this exists because k is not a Mersenne). When $m = 0$, it is also possible to solve $k \cdot b_0^2 + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$, because $k \equiv -1 \pmod{p}$. So if we let $b_0 \equiv -1 \pmod{p}$, then $k \cdot b_0^2 + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p}$. Note that if $b \equiv b_0 \pmod{p_0}$ then p_0 divides every other term in the sequence $k \cdot b^n + 1$ because b_0 has order 2 mod p_0 .

During the next loop $m = 1$ and we know that $k^{2^1} + 1$ has an odd prime factor (for all $m > 0$) from Theorem 3.2. Thus, we solve $k \cdot b_1^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p_1}$ for base b_1 , which is possible (for all $m > 0$) by Theorem 3.3. By Theorem 3.2, we know our solution has order $2^{m+1} = 4$ so we have a pattern

$$\underbrace{--, p_0, p_1, p_0}, \underbrace{--, p_0, p_1, p_0}, \dots$$

We repeat this process (steps 6 – 11) until there are two odd primes which divide $k^{2^m} + 1$. For the first prime p_m , the algorithm solves (as usual) $k \cdot b_m^n + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p_m}$. With the second prime, p_{m+1} , the algorithm solves $k \cdot b_{m+1} + 1 \equiv 0 \pmod{p_{m+1}}$ for base b_{m+1} to fill in the last hole in our pattern. So we have a cover $\{p_1, \dots, p_{m+1}\}$ which divide the terms $k \cdot b^n + 1$

with a pattern determined by Theorem 3.3 to be

$$\underbrace{p_{m+1}, p_0, p_1, p_0, p_2, p_0, \dots, p_m, \dots, p_0, p_1, p_0}.$$

We then use the Chinese Remainder Theorem (step 13) to solve for b . However, we must make sure the cover is not trivial so if $\gcd(k+1, b-1) \neq 1$, we can add $p_1 p_2 \cdots p_{m+1}$ to b to get b' . Now $\gcd(k+1, b'-1) = 1$ by Theorem 3.1. We are then left with a base b that makes k a Sierpiński Number with a cover S and a period equal to 2^{m+1} . \square

TABLE 1. The Algorithm Table

m	$k^{2^m} + 1$	p_m	n	$b_m \pmod{p}$
0	3	3	2	2
1	5	5	3	3
2	17	17	5	9
3	257	257	9	129
4	65537	65537	17	32769
5	641 · 6700417	641	33	321
		6700417	1	3350208

4. CONCLUSION

It is highly unlikely that there exists an integer k for which the sequence of generalized Fermat numbers of equation 3.1 are all prime. So given a k , we have shown how to find bases b for which $k \cdot b^n + 1$ has non-trivial cover, for all k for which these exist! However, this does not mean our choice of b is the least. Computations have shown that our solution for $k = 5$ is the smallest with period dividing 5040, but we do not know if the others are the smallest.

REFERENCES

1. A. Brunner, D. Krywaruczenko, C. Lowndale & C. Caldwell, The Sierpiński numbers base b , in process.
2. Y. Chen, On integers of the form $2^n \pm p_1^{\alpha_1} \cdots p_r^{\alpha_r}$, *Proc. Amer. Math. Soc.* **128** (2000), 1613–1616.
3. Y. Chen, On integers of the form $k2^n + 1$, *Proc. Amer. Math. Soc.* **129** (2001), 355–361.
4. Y. Chen, On integers of the forms $k - 2^n$ and $k2^n + 1$, *J. Number Theory* **89** (2001), 121–125.
5. Y. Chen, On integers of the forms $k^r - 2^n$ and $k^r 2^n + 1$, *J. Number Theory* **98:2** (2003), 310–319.
6. P. Erdős On integers of the form $2^k + p$ and some related problems, *Summa Brasil. Math. #2* (1950), 113–123.
7. M. Filaseta, C. Finch and M. Kozek, *On powers associated with Sierpiński numbers, Riesel numbers and Polignac’s conjecture*, (submitted).

8. A. Granville and P. Pleasants, Aurifeullian Factorization Mathematics of Computation, **75**:253, 497–508.
9. L. Helm & D. Norris, Seventeen or Bust—a distributed attack on the Sierpiński problem, <http://www.seventeenorbust.com/>.
10. A. Izotov, A note on Sierpiński numbers, *Fibonacci Quart.* **33**:3 (1995), 206–207.
11. L. Jones, Variation on a theme of Sierpiński, *J. Integer Seq.*, **10**, (2007), article 07.4.4.
12. W. Sierpiński, Sur un problème concernant les nombres $k \cdot 2^n + 1$, *Elem. Math.*, **15**(1960) 73–74; corrigendum, **17**(1962) 85.
13. R.W. Smith, Personal correspondence.