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The complicial sets model of higher ∞ -categories

Between Topology and Quantum Field Theory
A conference in celebration of Dan Freed

The idea of a higher ∞ -category



An ∞ -category, a nickname for an $(\infty, 1)$ -category, has:

- objects
- 1-arrows between these objects
- with composites of these 1-arrows witnessed by invertible 2-arrows
- with composition associative up to invertible 3-arrows (and unital)
- with these witnesses coherent up to invertible arrows all the way up

A higher ∞ -category, meaning an (∞, n) -category for $0 \leq n \leq \infty$, has:

- objects
- 1-arrows between these objects
- 2-arrows between these 1-arrows
- \vdots
- n -arrows between these $n - 1$ -arrows
- plus higher invertible arrows witnessing composition, units, associativity, and coherence all the way up

Fully extended topological quantum field theories



The (∞, n) -category Bord_n has

- objects = compact 0-manifolds
- k -arrows = k -manifolds with corners, for $1 \leq k \leq n$
- $n + 1$ -arrows = diffeomorphisms of n -manifolds rel boundary
- $n + m + 1$ -arrows = m -fold isotopies of diffeomorphisms, $m \geq 1$

often with extra structure (eg framing, orientation, G -structure).

A fully extended [topological quantum field theory](#) is a homomorphism with domain Bord_n , preserving the monoidal structure and all compositions. The [cobordism hypothesis](#) classifies fully extended TQFTs of framed bordisms by the value taken by the positively oriented point.

Dan Freed

- The [cobordism hypothesis](#), Bulletin of the AMS, vol 50, no 1, 2013, 57–92; [arXiv:1210.5100](#)

On the unicity of the theory of higher ∞ -categories

The schematic idea of an (∞, n) -category is made rigorous by various models: θ_n -spaces, iterated complete Segal spaces, Segal n -categories, n -quasi-categories, n -relative categories, ...

Theorem (Barwick–Schommer-Pries, et al). All of the above models of (∞, n) -categories are equivalent.

Clark Barwick and Christopher Schommer-Pries

- On the Unicity of the Homotopy Theory of Higher Categories
arXiv:1112.0040

Thus, it's tempting to work “model independently” when invoking higher ∞ -categories.

But the theory of higher ∞ -categories has not yet been comprehensively developed in any model, so there is “analytic” work still to be done.

Plan

Goal: introduce a user-friendly model of higher ∞ -categories

1. A simplicial model of $(\infty, 1)$ -categories
2. Towards a simplicial model of $(\infty, 2)$ -categories
3. The complicial sets model of higher ∞ -categories
4. Complicial sets in the wild (joint with Dominic Verity)



A simplicial model of
 $(\infty, 1)$ -categories



The idea of a 1-category

A 1-category has:

- objects: \bullet

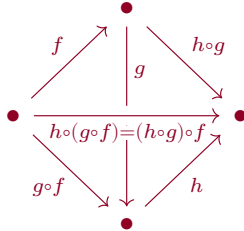
- 1-arrows: $\bullet \longrightarrow \bullet$

- composition: $\bullet \xrightarrow{f} \bullet \xrightarrow{g} \bullet$
 $\quad \quad \quad \text{---} g \circ f \text{---}$

- identity 1-arrows: $\bullet = = = \bullet$

- identity axioms: $\bullet \xrightarrow{f} \bullet = = = \bullet$ $\bullet = = = \bullet \xrightarrow{f} \bullet$
 $\quad \quad \quad \text{---} id \circ f = f \text{---}$ $\quad \quad \quad \text{---} f \circ id = f \text{---}$

- associativity axioms:



From 1-categories to $(\infty, 1)$ -categories

The composition operation and associativity and unit **axioms** in a 1-category become **higher data** in an $(\infty, 1)$ -category.

An $(\infty, 1)$ -category has:

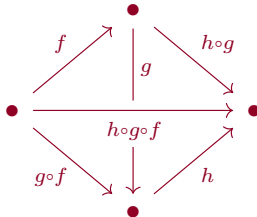
- objects \bullet ; 1-arrows $\bullet \longrightarrow \bullet$; identity 1-arrows $\bullet \equiv \bullet$

- composition  witnessed by invertible 2-arrows

- identity composition witnesses



- invertible 3-arrows witnessing associativity



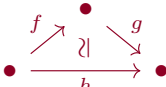
A model for $(\infty, 1)$ -categories

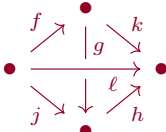


In a [quasi-category](#), one popular model for an $(\infty, 1)$ -category, this data is structured as a [simplicial set](#) with:

- 0-simplices = \bullet = objects

- 1-simplices = $\bullet \longrightarrow \bullet$ = 1-arrows

- 2-simplices =  = binary composites

- 3-simplices =  = ternary composites

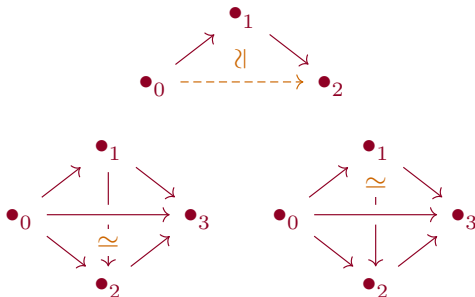
- n -simplices = n -ary composites

- with [degenerate](#) simplices used to encode identity arrows and identity composition witnesses

A model for $(\infty, 1)$ -categories

A **quasi-category** is a “simplicial set with composition”: a simplicial set in which every **inner horn** can be filled to a **simplex**.

Low dimensional horn filling:



An **inner horn** is the subcomplex of an n -simplex missing the top cell and the face opposite the vertex \bullet_k for $0 < k < n$.

Corollary: In a quasi-category, all n -arrows with $n > 1$ are **equivalences**.

Summary: quasi-categories model ∞ -categories

A **quasi-category** is a model of an infinite-dimensional category structured as a simplicial set.

- Basic data is given by low dimensional simplices:
 - 0-simplices = objects
 - 1-simplices = 1-arrows
- Axioms are witnessed by higher simplices:
 - 2-simplices witness binary composites
 - 3-simplices witness associativity of ternary composition
- Higher simplices also regarded as arrows: n -simplices = n -arrows
- Axioms imply that n -arrows are equivalences for $n > 1$.

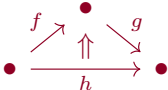
Thus a quasi-category is an **$(\infty, 1)$ -category**, with all n -arrows with $n > 1$ weakly invertible.

2

Towards a simplicial model of
 $(\infty, 2)$ -categories

Towards a simplicial model of an $(\infty, 2)$ -category

How might a simplicial set model an $(\infty, 2)$ -category?

- 0-simplices = \bullet = objects
- 1-simplices = $\bullet \longrightarrow \bullet$ = 1-arrows
- 2-simplices =  = 2-arrows

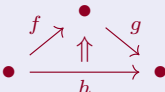
Problem: the 2-simplices must play a dual role, in which they are

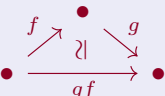
- interpreted as inhabited by possibly non-invertible 2-cells
- while also serving as witnesses for composition of 1-simplices

in which case it does not make sense to think of their inhabitants as non-invertible.

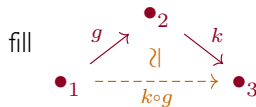
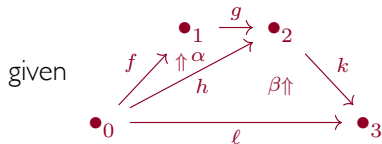
Idea: “mark” the 2-simplex witnesses for composition and demand that these **marked** 2-simplices behave like 2-dimensional **equivalences**.

Towards a simplicial model of an $(\infty, 2)$ -category

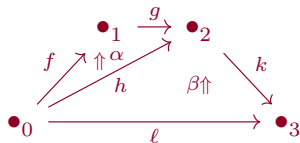
- 2-simplices =  = 2-arrows

- marked 2-simplices  witness 1-arrow composition

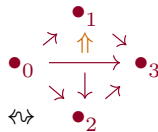
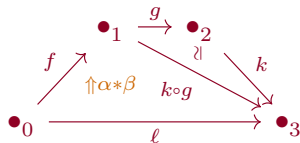
Now 3-simplices witness composition of 2-arrows:



then fill



\cong





The complicial sets model of higher
 ∞ -categories

Marked simplicial sets

For a simplicial set to model a higher ∞ -category with non-invertible arrows in each dimension:

- It should have a distinguished set of “marked” n -simplices witnessing composition of $n - 1$ -simplices.
- Identity arrows, encoded by the **degenerate** simplices, should be marked.
- Marked simplices should behave like **equivalences**.
- In particular, 1-simplices that witness an equivalence between objects should also be marked.

This motivates the following definition:

A **marked simplicial set** is a simplicial set with a designated subset of **marked** simplices that includes all degenerate simplices.

The symbol “ \simeq ” is used to decorate marked simplices.

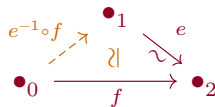
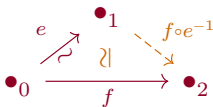
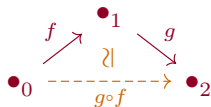
Complcial sets

Recall:

A **quasi-category** is a “simplicial set with composition”: a simplicial set in which every **inner horn** can be filled to a **simplex**.

A **complicial set** is a “marked simplicial set with composition”: a simplicial set in which every **admissible horn** can be filled to a **simplex** and in which marked simplices satisfy the 2-of-3 property.

Low dimensional admissible horn filling:

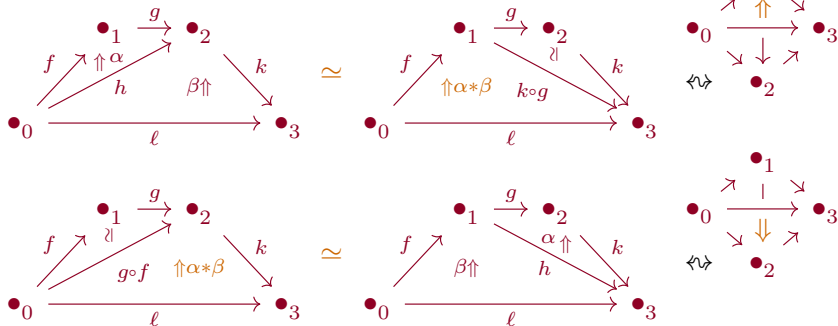


and if f and g are marked so is $g \circ f$.

Complcial sets

A **complcial set** is a “marked simplicial set with composition”: a simplicial set in which every **admissible horn** can be filled to a **simplex** and in which marked simplices satisfy the 2-of-3 property.

Low dimensional admissible horn filling:



and if α and β are marked so is $\alpha * \beta$.

Admissible horns

An n -simplex in a marked simplicial set is k -admissible — “its k th face is the composite of its $k - 1$ and $k + 1$ -faces” — if every face that contains all of the vertices $\bullet_{k-1}, \bullet_k, \bullet_{k+1}$ is marked.

Marked faces include:

- the n -simplex
- all codimension-1 faces except the $(k - 1)$ th, k th, and $(k + 1)$ th
- the 2-simplex spanned by $\{\bullet_{k-1}, \bullet_k, \bullet_{k+1}\}$ when $0 < k < n$
- the edge spanned by $\{\bullet_0, \bullet_1\}$ when $k = 0$ or $\{\bullet_{n-1}, \bullet_n\}$ when $k = n$.

An k -admissible n -horn is the subcomplex of the k -admissible n -simplex that is missing the n -simplex and its k -th face.

Strict ω -categories as strict complicial sets

A **strict complicial set** is a complicial set in which every admissible horn can be filled **uniquely**, a “marked simplicial set with **unique** composition.”

Any **strict ω -category** \mathcal{C} defines a strict complicial set $N\mathcal{C}$, called the **Street nerve**, whose n -simplices are strict ω -functors

$$\mathcal{O}_n \rightarrow \mathcal{C},$$

where

- \mathcal{O}_n is the free strict n -category generated by the n -simplex and
- an n -simplex is marked in $N\mathcal{C}$ just when the ω -functor $\mathcal{O}_n \rightarrow \mathcal{C}$ carries the top-dimensional n -arrow in \mathcal{O}_n to an **identity** in \mathcal{C} .

Street-Roberts Conjecture (Verity). The Street nerve defines a fully faithful embedding of strict ω -categories into marked simplicial sets, and the essential image is the category of strict complicial sets.

Strict ω -categories as weak complicial sets



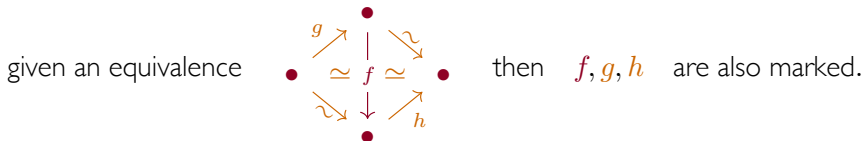
Strict ω -categories can also be a source of *weak* rather than *strict* complicial sets, simply by choosing a more expansive marking convention.

Any *strict ω -category* \mathcal{C} defines a complicial set \mathcal{NC} whose

- n -simplices are strict ω -functors $\mathcal{O}_n \rightarrow \mathcal{C}$ and where
- an n -simplex is marked in \mathcal{NC} just when the ω -functor $\mathcal{O}_n \rightarrow \mathcal{C}$ carries the top-dimensional n -arrow in \mathcal{O}_n to an **equivalence** in \mathcal{C} .

Moreover the complicial sets that arise in this way are **saturated**, meaning that every n -arrow **equivalence** is marked.

Saturation is a 2-of-6 property for marked simplices:



The n -complicial sets model of (∞, n) -categories

An n -complicial set is a saturated complicial set in which every simplex above dimension n is marked.

For example:

- the nerve of an ordinary 1-groupoid defines a 0-complicial set with everything marked
- the nerve of an ordinary 1-category defines a 1-complicial set with the isomorphisms marked
- the nerve of a strict 2-category defines a 2-complicial set with the 2-arrow isomorphisms and 1-arrow equivalences marked

In fact:

- A 0-complicial set is the same thing as a Kan complex, with everything marked.
- A 1-complicial set is exactly a quasi-category, with the equivalences marked.

Summary: complicial sets model higher ∞ -categories

A **complicial set** is a model of an infinite-dimensional category structured as a marked simplicial set.

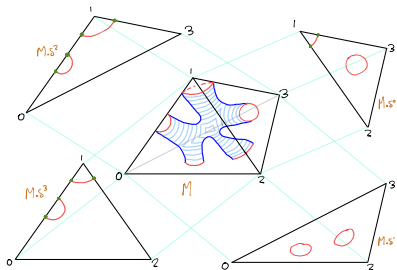
- Basic data is given by simplices:
 - 0-simplices = objects
 - n -simplices = n -arrows
- Axioms are witnessed by marked simplices:
 - marked n -simplices exhibit binary composites of $(n - 1)$ -simplices
- Marked simplices define invertible arrows:
 - marked n -simplices = n -equivalences
- In a **saturated** complicial set, all equivalences are marked.

An **n -complicial set**, a saturated complicial set in which every simplex above dimension n is marked, is a model of an (∞, n) -category.



Complicial sets in the wild (joint with
Dominic Verity)

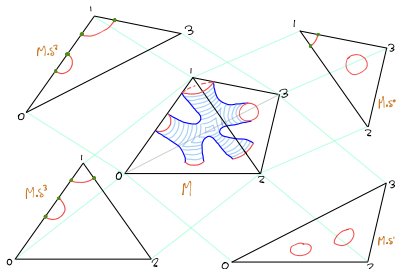
A simplicial set of simplicial bordisms (Verity)



A n -simplicial bordism is a functor from the category of faces of the n -simplex to the category of PL-manifolds and regular embeddings satisfying a boundary condition.

- Simplicial bordisms assemble into a **semi simplicial set** that admits fillers for all horns, constructed by gluing in cylinders.
- By a theorem of Rourke–Sanderson, degenerate simplices exist and make simplicial bordisms into a genuine **Kan complex**.

A complicial set of simplicial bordisms (Verity)



The Kan complex of simplicial bordisms can be marked in various ways:

- mark all bordisms as equivalences
- mark only trivial bordisms, which collapse onto their odd faces
- mark the simplicial bordisms that define h -cobordisms from their odd to their even faces

Theorem (Verity). All three marking conventions turn simplicial bordisms into a complicial set, and the third is the saturation of the second.

Complcial sets defined as homotopy coherent nerves

The **homotopy coherent nerve** converts a simplicially enriched category into a simplicial set.

Theorem (Cordier–Porter). The homotopy coherent nerve of a **Kan complex** enriched category is a **quasi-category**.

Theorem (Cordier–Porter). The homotopy coherent nerve of a **0-complicial set** enriched category is a **1-complicial set**.

Similarly:

Theorem*(Verity). The homotopy coherent nerve of a **n -complicial set** enriched category is a **$n + 1$ -complicial set**.

In particular, there are a plethora of **2-complicial sets of ∞ -categories** ...

The analytic vs synthetic theory of ∞ -categories

The notion of an ∞ -category is made rigorous by various models.

Q: How might you develop the category theory of ∞ -categories?

Strategies:

- work **analytically** to give categorical definitions and prove theorems using the combinatorics of one model
(eg., Joyal, Lurie, Gepner-Haugseug, Cisinski in **qCat**;
Kazhdan-Varshavsky, Rasekh in **Rezk**; Simpson in **Segal**)
- work **synthetically** to give categorical definitions and prove theorems in various models **qCat**, **Rezk**, **Segal**, **1-Comp** at once
(R-Verity: an **∞ -cosmos** axiomatizes the common features of the categories **qCat**, **Rezk**, **Segal**, **1-Comp** of ∞ -categories)
- work **synthetically** in a simplicial type theory augmenting homotopy type theory to prove theorems in **Rezk**
(R-Shulman: an **∞ -category** is a type with unique binary composites in which isomorphism is equivalent to identity)

∞ -cosmoi of ∞ -categories



Idea: an ∞ -cosmos is a category in which ∞ -categories live as objects that has enough structure to develop “formal category theory.”

An ∞ -cosmos is*:

- a quasi-categorically enriched category
- admitting “strict homotopy limits”: flexible weighted simplicially enriched limits.

Examples of ∞ -cosmoi:

- models of $(\infty, 1)$ -categories: \mathbf{qCat} , \mathbf{Rezk} , \mathbf{Segal} , $\mathbf{1-Comp}$
- models of (∞, n) -categories: $n\text{-qCat}$, $\theta_n\text{-Sp}$, \mathbf{CSS}_n , $n\text{-Comp}$
- \mathbf{Cat} , \mathbf{Kan} , \mathbf{Comp}
- If \mathcal{K} is an ∞ -cosmos, so are $\mathbf{Cart}(\mathcal{K})$, $\mathbf{coCart}(\mathcal{K})$ as well as the slices $\mathcal{K}_{/B}$, $\mathbf{Cart}(\mathcal{K})_{/B}$, $\mathbf{coCart}(\mathcal{K})_{/B}$ over an ∞ -category B .

Co/cartesian fibrations are on fleek

Challenge: define the Yoneda embedding as a functor between ∞ -categories.

- Why is this so onerous? It's difficult to fully specify the data of a homotopy coherent diagram.
- Instead, an ∞ -category-valued diagram can be repackaged as a co/cartesian fibration, with the homotopy coherence encoded by a universal property.

Idea: a co/cartesian fibration $E \xrightarrow{p} B$ is a family of ∞ -categories E_b parametrized covariantly/contravariantly by elements b of B .

The synthetic definition of a **cocartesian fibration**: a functor $E \xrightarrow{p} B$ so that $E^2 \xrightarrow{p} p \downarrow B$ admits a left adjoint right inverse.

The global universal property of co/cartesian fibrations

The codomain projection functor $\text{cod}: \text{coCart}(\mathcal{K}) \rightarrow \mathcal{K}$ defines a “cartesian fibration of quasi-categorically enriched categories”:

- For $F \xrightarrow{q} A$ and $E \xrightarrow{p} B$ in $\text{coCart}(\mathcal{K})$, the map $\text{Fun}^{\text{cart}}(q, p) \rightarrow \text{Fun}(A, B)$ defines a cocartesian fibration in qCat .
- Pre- or post-composing by the arrows of $\text{coCart}(\mathcal{K})$ defines a cartesian functor between these cocartesian fibrations.
- A pullback
$$\begin{array}{ccc} F & \xrightarrow{g} & E \\ q \downarrow \lrcorner & & \lrcorner \downarrow p \\ A & \xrightarrow{f} & B \end{array}$$
 forms a “cartesian lift of f with codomain p .”

Consequently, for $U \hookrightarrow V$, cocartesian cocones with nadir p

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \mathfrak{e}U \triangleright & \longrightarrow & \text{coCart}(\mathcal{K}) \\ \downarrow & \dashrightarrow & \downarrow \text{cod} \\ \mathfrak{e}V \triangleright & \longrightarrow & \mathcal{K} \end{array}$$

admit extensions that are unique up to a contractible space of choices.

The comprehension construction

A canonical lifting problem defines the **comprehension construction**:

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 \mathfrak{C}\emptyset \triangleright & \xrightarrow{p: E \rightarrow B} & \text{coCart}(\mathcal{K}) & \xrightarrow{\text{dom}} \twoheadrightarrow & \mathcal{K} \\
 \downarrow & & \searrow \text{dashed} & & \downarrow \text{cod} \\
 \mathfrak{C}B_0 \hookrightarrow & \mathfrak{C}B_0 \triangleright & \longrightarrow & & \mathcal{K}
 \end{array}$$

which “**straightens**” p into a homotopy coherent diagram $c_p: \mathfrak{C}B_0 \rightarrow \mathcal{K}$ indexed by the underlying quasi-category of B .

Applying comprehension in $\mathcal{K}/_A$ to a universal fibration $\tilde{U} \xrightarrow{\pi} U$ in \mathcal{K} , yields $c_\pi: \mathfrak{C}\text{Fun}(A, U) \rightarrow \text{coCart}(\mathcal{K})/_A$, which “**unstraightens**” an ∞ -category-valued diagram into a cocartesian fibration over A .

Applying comprehension in $\text{Cart}(\mathcal{K})/_A$ to the cocartesian fibration $A^2 \xrightarrow{\text{cod}} A$ constructs the **Yoneda embedding** $\mathfrak{C}A_0 \rightarrow \text{Cart}(\mathcal{K})/_A$.

References

For more on the complicial sets model of higher ∞ -categories see:

Dominic Verity

- [Complicial sets, characterising the simplicial nerves of strict \$\omega\$ -categories](#), Mem. Amer. Math. Soc., 2008; [arXiv:math/0410412](#)
- [Weak complicial sets I, basic homotopy theory](#), Adv. Math., 2008; [arXiv:math/0604414](#)
- [Weak complicial sets II, nerves of complicial Gray-categories](#), Contemporary Mathematics, 2007, [arXiv:math/0604416](#)

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- [Complicial sets, an overture](#), 2016 MATRIX Annals, [arXiv:1610.06801](#)

Emily Riehl and Dominic Verity

- [Elements of \$\infty\$ -Category Theory](#), draft book in progress www.math.jhu.edu/~eriehl/elements.pdf (particularly Appendix D: the combinatorics of (marked) simplicial sets)