

Final Scientific Report SNF Project no. 200020-131827

“Synchronizing Models and Code”

February 20, 2019

1 Summary of results

Software developers actually spend much of their time not producing new code, but analysing the existing code base. Integrated Development Environments (IDEs) however are mostly glorified text editors, and offer only limited support for developers to query and analyse software systems. In this continuation of our SNF project *Agile Software Assessment*, we proceeded to explore new ways to enable developers to efficiently answer detailed questions about the software system under development.

Results

Agile Model Extraction

In this track we explored techniques to rapidly extract software models from unknown source code. The key result was the development of *bounded seas*, an approach to parsing that allows one to incrementally refine a parser that recognizes elements of interest within source code while ignoring others. [KVG⁺16] [Kur16] [KVG⁺18]. In contrast to older “island parsers”, bounded seas are not fragile to incremental changes, since the rules that determine what to ignore are derived from the rules describing what to recognize. The PetitParser framework, which served as a testbed for these ideas, is widely available¹, and has been ported to other languages, notable Java² and Dart.³

In addition to this work, we explored, with the help of several Bachelors and Masters students, several other promising directions, including rapidly building parsers from pre-existing building blocks [Fuc17] testing the limits of island parsing and parsing expression grammars with complex programming languages [Iya16] [Kub16] [Rüf16] and applying machine learning approaches to automatically recognize structural patterns in code [Wal16].

More recently we have started to explore how to exploit executable domain models as part of the software system under development, to keep requirements and implementation in sync [Pat18].

Context-Aware Tooling

In this track we explored ways to close the abstraction gap between code and application domains in IDEs.

We continued to explore the potential for *modal tools*: software development tools that are designed to be easily tailored to specific application domains [CGK⁺16b] [Chi16d] [Chi16e] [CGK⁺17]. In particular, with the help of Bachelors and Masters students we developed a modal object inspector that supports reproducible developer interactions [Kau18], a modal context-aware search tool [CGK⁺16a], and a modal editor [Syr18]. Many of these innovations have been adopted in the Pharo⁴ development environment, and others are part of the Glamorous Toolkit.⁵

¹<https://github.com/moosetechnology/PetitParser>

²<https://github.com/petitparser/java-petitparser>

³<https://pub.dartlang.org/packages/petitparser>

⁴<https://pharo.org>

⁵<https://gtoolkit.com>

In related work, we have further explored how to support live debugging, particularly of concurrent threads [Ste17] [Cor16] [Les16] [LCN16] [LCN18].

We have also studied how to support software developers in selecting suitable visualizations to present and explore the results of software analyses. Based on the results of a systematic literature review of software visualizations [MGAN18]. We have developed tools to help developers explore and select suitable visualizations [MGN16a] [MGN⁺16b] [MGN17] as well as dedicated tools to visualize and explore collaboration networks [MSGN16] [Sel16].

More recently we have studied the impact of the medium (*i.e.*, computer screen vs. physical 3D models vs. virtual reality) on the effectiveness of software visualizations [MFB⁺17] [MGAN17] [Mer18]. We are continuing to explore the potential for augmented reality to enrich the experience of software developers by providing a separate medium to monitor software quality issues [MBN18] [Hes19].

Ecosystem Mining

Here we explored how information mined from the broader ecosystems of related software can be exploited to support analysis of a given software system under development.

The *Ecosystem Monitoring Framework* [Spa16c] [Spa16d] is a proof-of-concept infrastructure that can automate a variety of different kinds of analyses on a given corpus of software projects. The *Object Repository* [SGN16] is an experimental ecosystem analysis tool that extracts code snippets from the ecosystem that can create a variety of instances (*i.e.*, objects) from the application domain. These objects can then be used as input for other analyses, such as determining potential dynamic types.

In related research, we have investigated the effectiveness of numerous lightweight heuristics to infer types for dynamically-typed programming languages [MN16] [MGN17a] [MGN17b] [Mil17c] [Mil17d] and we have also explored the use of data extracted from the inline caches of virtual machines to rank the inferred types [MBGN18] [MBGN16].

In yet other work, we mined software ecosystems to infer the likelihood of the most common type of errors in Java code, namely “null pointer exceptions”, which arise when an attempt is made to use an uninitialized variable. By analyzing what proportion of other clients guard against null errors, we can assess with high reliability the likelihood that a given piece of code is in error [Leu17] [LOGN17a] [LOGN17b] [Tra16].

Finally, we have started to explore the use of natural language processing to align developer questions with relevant software analyses [Ran18].

Evolutionary Monitoring

This track is concerned with monitoring of technical debt over the lifetime of a software project.

We have carried out various empirical studies to track the evolution of exception usage in Java projects [OCS⁺17] [OCC⁺17] [Hoh18]. We have confirmed that bad programming practices, in which null return values are abused to signal an error instead of raising an exception, are among the leading causes of bugs in Java programs [OLLN16]. We have extensively explored the use of machine learning techniques for bug prediction, and found that feature selection and hyperparameter tuning have a significant impact on the quality and efficiency of the results [Osm16a] [Osm16b] [OGN17b] [OGN17a] [OGNL17] [Osm17] [Bro18].

We have explored ways to improve feedback to developers of software quality issues by reporting such issues “just in time”. The resulting tool, called QualityAssistant, is now a standard feature of the Pharo IDE [TGN16] [Tym17c] [TGN17] [Tym17f] [TGN18]. A dedicated 3D visualization reveals how code quality evolves over time [TMGN16] [STSB16].

Finally, we have studied the effectiveness of “code smell” detection rules to expose security concerns in the development of mobile apps [Gad17] [Fri18] [Spr18] [Ytr18] [CSGN18] [GGFN18] [GGN17] [HG18] [Haz18]. The results of this work will be integrated into the Android Studio IDE.

Staff contributions

This project was supervised by Oscar Nierstrasz (Full Professor) and Mohammad Ghafari (Postdoc).

Here we summarize the contributions of the project staff (PhD students) throughout the project. Note that we only report on the staff whose salaries were paid from this project.⁶

- Andrei Chiş worked extensively on the development of “moldable tools” [CGK⁺16a] [CGK⁺16b] [Chi16e] [CGK⁺17] [Les16] [LCN16] [LCN18]. He defended his PhD [Chi16d] in September 2016, and now works for feenk GmbH in Bern. We plan to continue to collaborate with him in the context of the followup SNSF project.
- Claudio Corrodi carried out some promising work on declarative breakpoints for live debugging [Cor16] and on benchmarking tools to detect Android security issues [CSGN18]. He terminated his doctoral studies in 2018, however, to pursue an industrial career.
- Pascal Gadiant has been studying effective techniques to detect security issues on mobile apps, particularly related to data leaks [Gad17] [GGFN18] [GGN17]. He is expected to defend his PhD in the Autumn of 2021.
- Mohammadreza Hazhirpasand started his PhD studies in April 2018. He has also been studying security issues in mobile apps [HG18] [Haz18] and is currently carrying out an empirical study to assess the performance of Java developers in using cryptographic APIs. He is scheduled to defend his PhD in the Spring of 2022.
- Manuel Leuenberger has developed techniques to automatically detect the need for null checks in software based on ecosystem analysis [Leu17] [LOGN17a] [LOGN17b]. He is now expanding this work to tackle the broader problem of how to assist developers in migrating code to address API changes. He plans to defend his thesis in early 2021.
- Haidar Osman carried out research in improving the quality of automated bug prediction [OLLN16] [Osm16a] [Osm16b] [OGN17b] [OCS⁺17] [OGN17a] [OCC⁺17] [OGNLI17]. He successfully defended his dissertation [Osm17] in December 2017. He now works as a Data Scientist for Swisscom in Bern. We are also collaborating with him in the followup SNSF project.
- Nitish Patkar started his PhD research in March 2018. He is studying the problem of how to improve the requirements elicitation process with the help of executable domain models [Pat18]. He will defend his thesis in early 2022.
- Pooja Rani (started January 2018) is studying ways to better support software developers in the IDE by correlating developer questions with the tasks at hand [Ran18]. She will defend her thesis at the end of 2021.
- Boris Spasojević carried out research on ecosystem monitoring [SGN16] [Spa16c]. Boris Spasojević defended his thesis [Spa16d] in December 2016. He now works as a Research Scientist at Oracle Labs in Baden. We are continuing to collaborate with him in the followup SNSF project.
- Yuriy Tymchuk worked on “just in time” quality feedback in the IDE [STSB16] [TMGN16] [TGN16] [Tym17c] [TGN17] [TGN18]. Yuriy Tymchuk defended his PhD [Tym17f] in December 2017. He now works as a Data Scientist at Swisscom in Bern.

Changes to the research plan and Important Events

There were no major deviations from the research plan. Claudio Corrodi interrupted his PhD studies, and has been replaced by Mohammadreza Hazhirpasand.

⁶In addition, Jan Kurš was paid from the predecessor project, ASA1 but from Canton in ASA2. He successfully defended his dissertation [Kur16] in October 2016, and now works for Google Zurich. Leonel Merino was supported from a Chilean doctoral grant. He defended his PhD [Mer18] in July 2018, and is now working at the Institute for Visualisation and Interactive Systems (VIS) at the University of Stuttgart. Nevena Milojković-Lazarević was paid from Canton. She defended her PhD [Mil17d] in June 2016, and now works as a Data Scientist at local.ch.

2 Research output

All reported publications are available electronically from the project's home page:

<http://scg.unibe.ch/asa2>

We also list selected PhD, Masters and Bachelors theses directly relevant to this project.

Journal papers

- [GGFN18] Pascal Gadiant, Mohammad Ghafari, Patrick Frischknecht, and Oscar Nierstrasz. Security code smells in Android ICC. *Empirical Software Engineering*, 2018. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/papers/Gadi18a.pdf>, doi:10.1007/s10664-018-9673-y.
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Conference papers

- [CGK⁺16a] Andrei Chiş, Tudor Gîrba, Juraj Kubelka, Oscar Nierstrasz, Stefan Reichhart, and Aliaksei Syrel. Moldable, context-aware searching with Spotter. In *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM International Symposium on New Ideas, New Paradigms, and Reflections on Programming and Software*, Onward! 2016, pages 128–144, New York, NY, USA, 2016. ACM. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/papers/Chis16a-MoldableContextAwareSearchingWithSpotter.pdf>, doi:10.1145/2986012.2986023.
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- [CSGN18] Claudio Corrodi, Timo Spring, Mohammad Ghafari, and Oscar Nierstrasz. Idea: Benchmarking Android data leak detection tools. In Mathias Payer, Awais Rashid, and Jose M. Such, editors, *Engineering Secure Software and Systems*, pages 116–123, Cham, 2018. Springer International Publishing. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/papers/Corr18a.pdf>, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-94496-8_9.
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- [LOGN17b] Manuel Leuenberger, Haidar Osman, Mohammad Ghafari, and Oscar Nierstrasz. KOWALSKI: Collecting API clients in easy mode. In *Proceedings of the 33rd International Conference on Software Maintenance and Evolution*, ICSME 2017. IEEE, 2017. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/papers/Leue17c-KowalskiCollectingApi.pdf>, doi:10.1109/ICSME.2017.78.
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International Workshop papers

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Book chapters

- [CGK⁺17] Andrei Chiş, Tudor Gîrba, Juraj Kubelka, Oscar Nierstrasz, Stefan Reichhart, and Aliaksei Syrel. Moldable tools for object-oriented development. In Bertrand Meyer Manuel Mazzara, editor, *PAUSE: Present And Ulterior Software Engineering*, pages 77–101. Springer, Cham, 2017. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/papers/Chis17a-MoldableToolsPAUSE.pdf>, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-67425-4_6.

Selected PhD, MSc and Bachelors Theses

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- [Cur18] Simon Curty. Issue report assessment — assessment of issue report quality and class through natural language processing. Bachelor's thesis, University of Bern, February 2018. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/projects/Curt18a.pdf>.
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- [Fri18] Patrick Frischknecht. Security in Android ICC. Bachelor's thesis, University of Bern, June 2018. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/projects/Fris18a.pdf>.
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- [Hes19] Mario Hess. Pervasive visualization in immersive augmented reality for software performance monitoring. Bachelor's thesis, University of Bern, February 2019. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/projects/Hess19a.pdf>.
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- [Mil17d] Nevena Milojković. *Augmenting Type Inference with Lightweight Heuristics*. PhD thesis, University of Bern, June 2017. URL: <http://scg.unibe.ch/archive/phd/lazarevic-phd.pdf>.
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