

Maispion: A Tool for Analysing and Visualising Open Source Software Developer Communities

François Stephany
University of Mons & agilitic
Place du Parc 20
7000 Mons, Belgium
francois.stephany@agilitic.com

Tom Mens
University of Mons
Place du Parc 20
7000 Mons, Belgium
tom.mens@umons.ac.be

Tudor Gîrba
University of Berne
Neubrûckstrasse 10
3012 Bern, Switzerland
girba@iam.unibe.ch

ABSTRACT

We present *Maispion*, a tool for analysing software developer communities. The tool, developed in Smalltalk, mines mailing list and version repositories, and provides visualisations to provide insights into the ecosystem of open source software (OSS) development. We show how Maispion can analyze the history of medium to large OSS communities, by applying our tool to three well-known open source projects: Moose, Drupal and Python.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.9 [Software Engineering]: Management; D.3.2 [Programming languages]: Smalltalk; D.2.3 [Software Engineering]: Coding Tools and Techniques

General Terms

Human factors, Languages

Keywords

software evolution, mining software repositories, software visualisation, Smalltalk, open source

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is crucial for the long term success of software projects [2, 4]. Developers need to communicate with their peers and to share information within their team in order to get the most efficient coordination. This is especially true in open source software projects, that have a flexible and volatile social structure and are often managed in a less strict way. However, the larger the team, the more difficult communication is.

Numerous researchers explored the ecosystem of open source software development [10, 12, 13]. Nevertheless, dedicated tool support for analysing and visualising the social structure of open source software development, and how it evolves, is largely inexistent. To fill this gap, we implemented a

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Smalltalk tool, called *Maispion*. In this article, we illustrate how this tool can be used to analyze and visualize mailing lists and source code version repositories of open source projects. We validate our tool by applying it on three well-known open source projects (Moose, Drupal and Python) for which we aim to understand how their developer community behaves.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains the various visualisations provided by *Maispion*. Section 3 shows the internals of our tool. In Section 4 we discuss the results obtained from applying our tool to the case studies. In Section 5 we conclude and provide an outlook of the future work.

2. VISUALISING COMMUNICATION WITH MAISPION

Analysing mailing lists used by a community of software developers provides insights in how developers work and what are the most important persons involved in the project.

Open-source projects typically have a mailing list that channels the communication in the project. Mailman¹ is one of the most most used infrastructures for handling mailing lists. While these infrastructures do offer a robust service for handling and dispatching mails, they provide only a rudimentary overview of the discussions that already took place.

In this section we explain the different visualisations of mailing list data and versioning data that *Maispion* provides.

2.1 Tree view

First of all, a mailing list can be seen as a tree, in which each mail either starts a new thread or is a response to another mail from an existing thread. Browsing the Mailman archives online with a web browser does not help much: We can only browse the mailing list on a monthly basis and we cannot easily see who are the persons that are the most active or which threads are particularly long (see Figure 1). *Maispion* can provide a digest of the mailing list by showing all the e-mail threads as trees.

For example, Figure 2 shows a number of threads in the Moose mailing list. In this visualisation, each e-mail is represented by a square. A tree of e-mails is actually a thread, where the top square is the first e-mail of this thread. The distance between an e-mail and a reply maps the time between the two; the longer the time, the longer the edge.

¹<http://www.gnu.org/software/mailman/index.html>

Archive	View by:	Downloadable version
April 2009:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 622 KB]
March 2009:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 803 KB]
February 2009:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 661 KB]
January 2009:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 296 KB]
December 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 233 KB]
November 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 315 KB]
October 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 430 KB]
September 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 201 KB]
August 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 672 KB]
July 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 524 KB]
June 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Text 517 KB]
May 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 52 KB]
April 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 148 KB]
March 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 115 KB]
February 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 182 KB]
January 2008:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 258 KB]
December 2007:	[Thread] [Subject] [Author] [Date]	[Gzip'd Text 134 KB]

Figure 1: A sample of Mailman web archives from the Drupal mailing list

We took the ten persons that have sent the most e-mails and assigned a colour to each of them. The white colour is assigned to the other individuals. As with all the other diagrams and visualisations, this view is interactive. It is possible to right-click on any entity and open an inspector on it or launch another visualisation (the menu will show any action that is relevant for the selected entity).

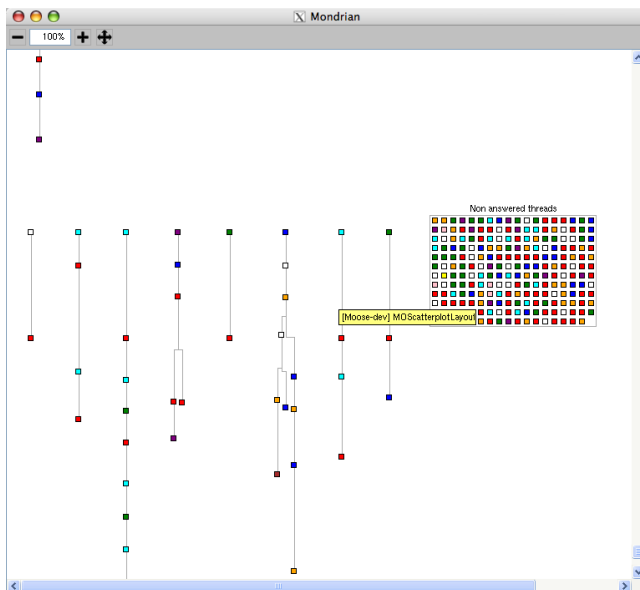


Figure 2: E-mail threads in the Moose mailing list

2.2 Activity distribution over time

In order to detect whether or not a project is developed by professional developers, it is important to know when they are working. While professional programmers are paid

to work on the project during office hours from Monday to Friday², non-professionals are more likely to develop during the evening. To verify this hypothesis, *Maispion* can generate diagrams that show when developers are committing code or when they are sending e-mails. For example, Figure 3 shows that most of the commits in the Drupal version repository happen between 9AM and 7PM, followed by a peak in activity until midnight. As such, Drupal developers appear to continue to work after office hours.

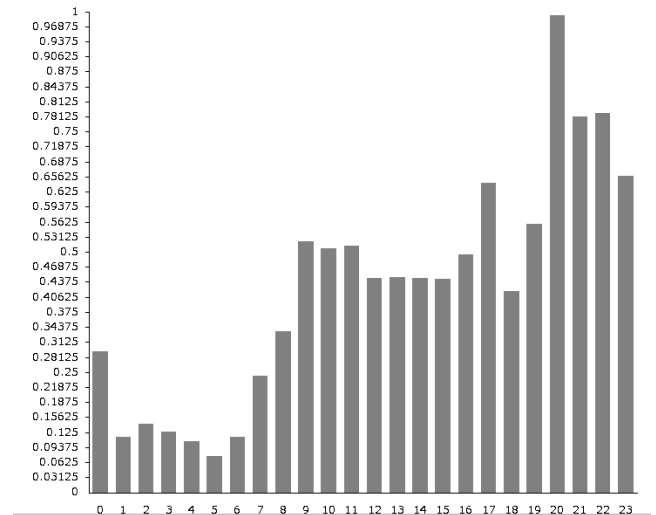


Figure 3: Hourly activity of commits in the Drupal repository. The x -axis shows the hour of the day and the y -axis maps the average number of commits made during the given hour.

2.3 Evolution of the activity

We assess the activity in the mailing list by the number of e-mails that are sent. In a version repository, an activity is basically a commit. By analysing the evolution of the activity we know if the project is growing, stable or even abandoned. The level of activity is a good indicator of the health of a project. *Maispion* gives a monthly view of the activity. This view is available for the repository and for the mailing list. The two can be combined within the same diagram (see Figure 4).

In software development, a *sprint* is a short amount of time (maximum several days) dedicated to work on a project. The developers meet in real life and stay together during the sprint. If we want to analyze a posteriori what happened during such a code sprint, it is possible to show the activity on a daily basis. Figure 5 shows the daily activity of the Python project. Each point of the horizontal axis represent one day. The bar that goes up maps the number of e-mails that were sent that day while the bar that goes down maps the number of commits that were pushed in the repository that day.

2.4 Committers period of activity

²This does not exclude, of course, that they may and often will continue to work outside office hours.

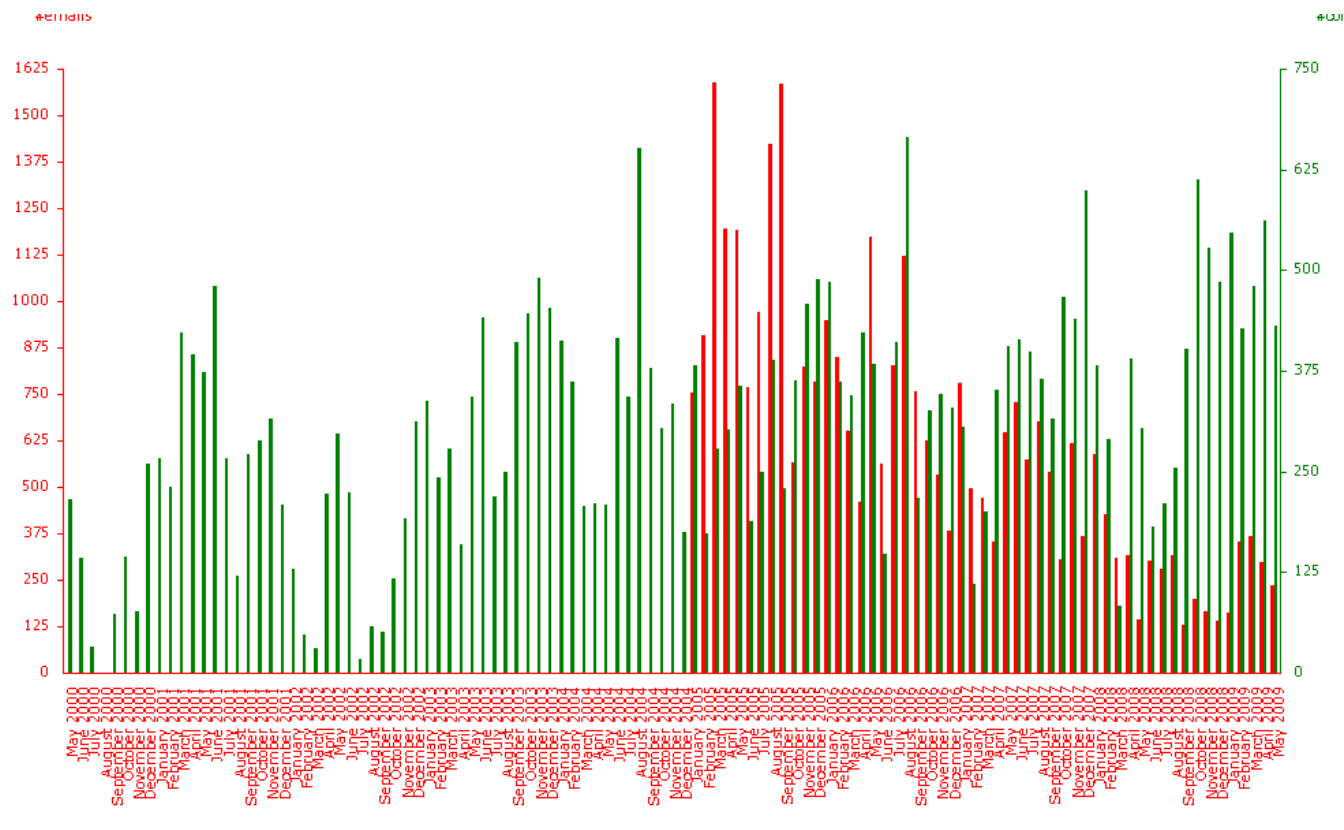


Figure 4: Drupal monthly evolution of activity (red bars represent the e-mail volume, green bars represent the commit volume)

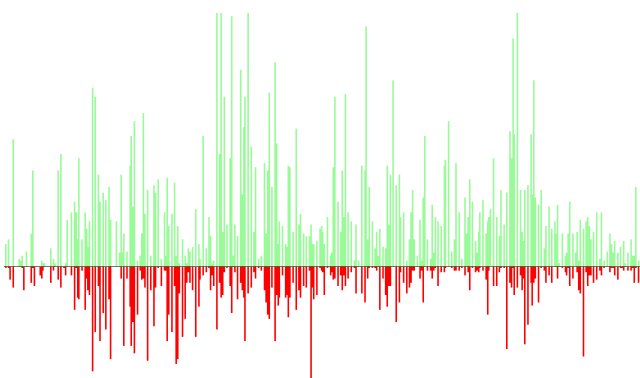


Figure 5: Daily activity for the Python project

Despite major differences, open source developers have a common point with developers employed to work on a proprietary project: they come and go. Open source developers are free to leave a project or to join an existing one. *Maispion* proposes a visualisation to spot this behaviour. Figure 6 shows the activity period of the Drupal-core committers.

2.5 E-mail address and repository login usage

It is not uncommon for people to use multiple e-mail ad-

resses. For example, they sometimes start using a new address when they change their job or when they leave university. To visualize this behaviour, we developed a diagram showing how an individual uses his e-mail addresses over time when contributing to a mailing list. For example, Figure 7 shows that a particular Moose developer has used 5 different e-mail addresses during the time period studied: 2 private e-mail addresses, and 3 different university addresses. The latter reflects the fact that this particular person has moved twice to a different university. We also observe a clear overlap of his e-mail address usage.

This view is also available for the repository logins. Because a repository account is set up once, a developer will not change his repository login as often as his e-mail address but it sometimes happens.

2.6 Interlocutors and collaborators

The purpose of a (developer) mailing list is to communicate with other individuals participating in the project. To know who are the primary interlocutors of someone, *Maispion* shows with whom someone is communicating the most frequently. We consider two persons to be communicating with each other if they are active in the same thread. *Maispion* can display the interlocutors of a particular individual. Figure 8 illustrates this for the most active committer of Drupal. He appears to be communicating a lot with (i.e., participating in the same e-mail threads as) only a few developers, and only occasionally with the majority of the other

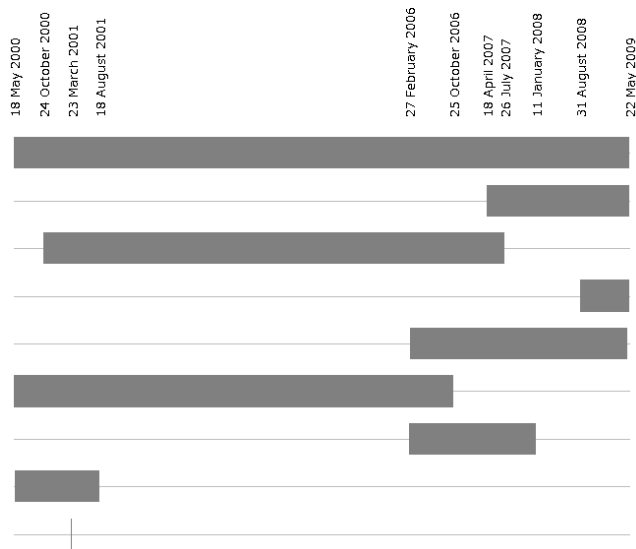


Figure 6: Drupal committers period of activity. Each horizontal line represents the commit activity period of a developer. Only the first individual, which happens to be the founder of Drupal, was active over the entire studied period.



Figure 7: Email addresses usage of a specific developer on the Moose mailing list. Each horizontal bar represents a different e-mail address of this developer.

developers.

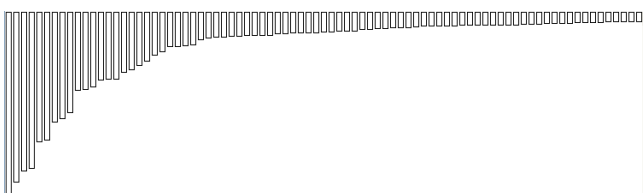


Figure 8: Communication frequency of one of the key developers of Drupal with other developers (in the mailing list).

A similar view is proposed to see the collaborators of an individual in the version repository. For a Store repository,

we say that two persons are collaborators if they have committed code to the same project [9]. For a CVS or SVN repository, we say that two persons are collaborators if they have worked on the same file [6].

2.7 Distribution of commit volume

Many successful open source projects were started by a programmer who wanted to solve a particular problem. He started to develop a tool that he intended to use for his personal needs, but once the tool is released to the public it gains attention from other developers. The consequence of this schema is that one person (the creator of the project) commits a lot and often owns the majority of the code. He is the person who drives the project and decides which patches will be integrated or not. If this person stops to work on the project, the probability that the whole project dies can be quite high. To analyze this possibility, we want to identify the key persons involved in a software project. We developed three different view for this purpose; the *commit activity distribution* (Figure 9), the *e-mail activity distribution*, and the *activity scatterplot* (Figure 10). The latter one shows how commit activity and e-mail activity are correlated. As we can see in the figure, some people tend to be more active in the mailing list, while others are more active in the version repository.

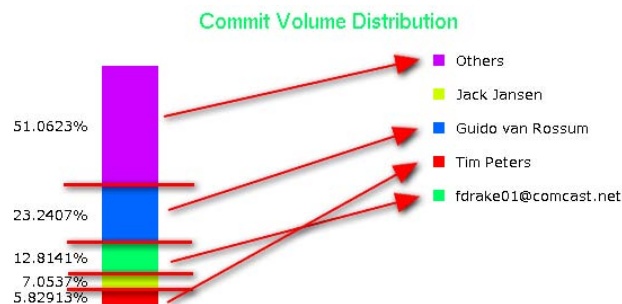


Figure 9: Commit distribution in the Python source repository

3. MAISPION ARCHITECTURE

Maispion was developed by the first author in the context of his master thesis [16] on top of the Moose platform [5]. *Maispion* imports data from source code version repositories and mailing lists. This data is subsequently processed by *Maispion* using dedicated visualisations implemented using *Mondrian* [11] and *Eyese* [8]. *Maispion* was developed with Visualworks 7.6 and is available on the SCG Store repository³.

3.1 Importing versions and mailing lists

Figure 11 shows the essence of *Maispion*'s architecture. A bridge pattern is used to capture the central notion of User-Identity. It aggregates the fact that any individual can contribute to the open source project in two different ways: by sending e-mails to the mailing list, or by committing versions to the source code repository. The same user can use many

³See scg.unibe.ch/wiki/howtos/howtoaccessscgstore to find out how to access this repository.

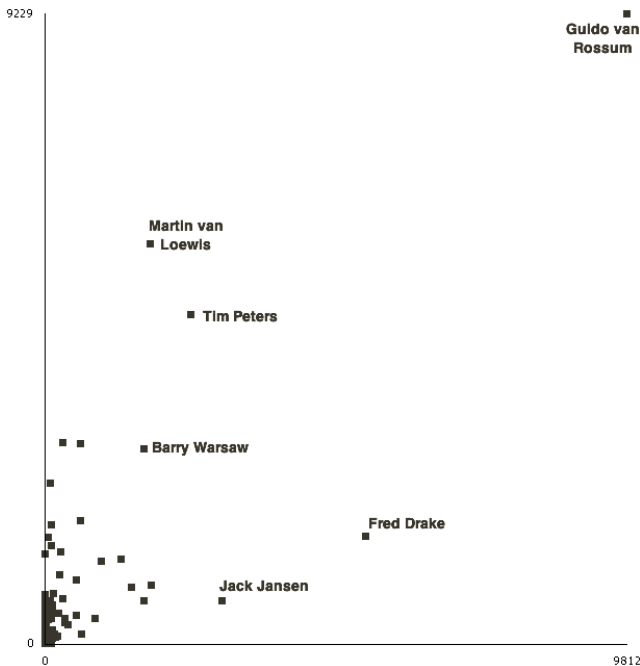


Figure 10: Activity scatterplot for the Python project. The x -axis represents the number of commits, the y -axis the number of e-mails

different email addresses (each represented by `EmailUser`) to communicate on the mailing list, and can have different identities (each represented by `RepositoryUser`) when committing to the version repository. The `Bridge` is used to link a `Mailbox`, a `Repository` and the user identities. A `Mailbox` keeps track of its e-mail senders and messages. A repository does the same for its users and commits.

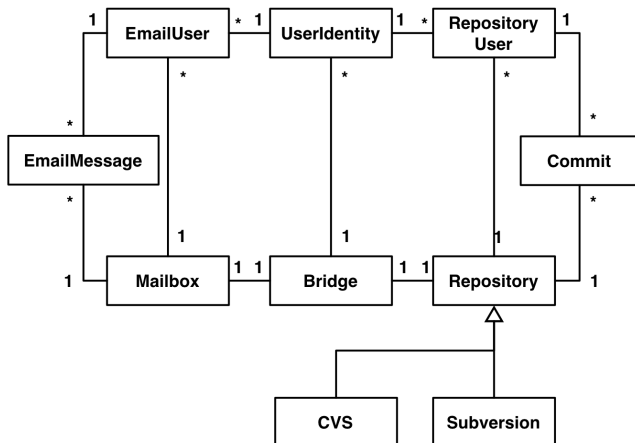


Figure 11: Core architecture of Maispion

In its current version, *Maispion* supports three different types of version repositories: SVN, CVS and Store. The chosen architecture abstracts away from these different repositories by putting all common version control behaviour in the `Repository` class that is specialised for each supported

type of version repository. All *Maispion*'s visualisations are defined at the abstract level, and new types of version repositories (e.g., Git, Perforce) can be accommodated easily by creating new subclasses of `Repository`.

For the three currently supported version repositories we proceeded as follows. CVS logs were imported with the help of *Chronia* [15]. SVN logs, generated by SVN in XML format⁴, were imported using existing Smalltalk libraries for XML parsing. To import data from the Store repository, we used the *StoreIt* tool, available on the SCG Store repository.

Maispion currently imports e-mails encoded in the *mbox* format [7]. *Maispion* can automatically download mailing lists hosted by *Mailman*, an open source mailing list management tool used by many open source projects (e.g., Pharo, Python, Imagemagick). Accommodating other types of mailing list formats is left for future work.

All the data imported in *Maispion* can be browsed with the *Moose* browser. This browser helps to navigate within an instance of a model.

3.2 Merging identities

One of the most important issues when dealing with multiple sources of data is the identification of individuals. We need to identify persons committing source code in the repository with the mailing list participants. *Maispion* solves this problem by performing a semi-automatic identity recognition. Figure 12 illustrates our method.

The similarity between two strings is computed using the Levenshtein distance [14]. It is a real distance metric in the mathematical sense of the word (i.e., it is symmetric and satisfies the triangle inequality). This distance represents the minimal number of insertions, deletions and substitutions to make the two strings equal. Thus, if the two strings are identical, the Levenshtein distance between them is 0. For example, *Maispion* will detect that the mailing list participants

francois.stephany@umh.ac.be (*Francois Stephany*) and *fstephany@mysuperdomain.st* (*francois*) are probably the same person: the name *Francois Stephany* from the first e-mail will generate a list of possible nicknames that includes *fstephany*.

Of course this approach has its limitations: it is impossible to identify accurately whether two e-mail addresses belong to the same individual if the names used are completely different. For example, it is impossible to know that *francois.stephany@umh.ac.be* from a mailing list is related to the login *tulipe.moutarde* in a version repository without performing a social search. In the case of open source software, social websites such as Twitter, Sourceforge and Github are good starting points. We thus need to perform a manual verification of all the identity associations generated by *Maispion*. This task is facilitated by the *Merge browser* that we implemented. Figure 13 illustrates how the user can easily edit, compare and create identities from e-mail addresses or version repository logins.

4. VALIDATION

To show that *Maispion* can be used in practice, we validated it by analysing and visualising three open source

⁴The following command can be used to generate an SVN log in XML format: `svn log -verbose -xml <REPO URL> > log.xml`

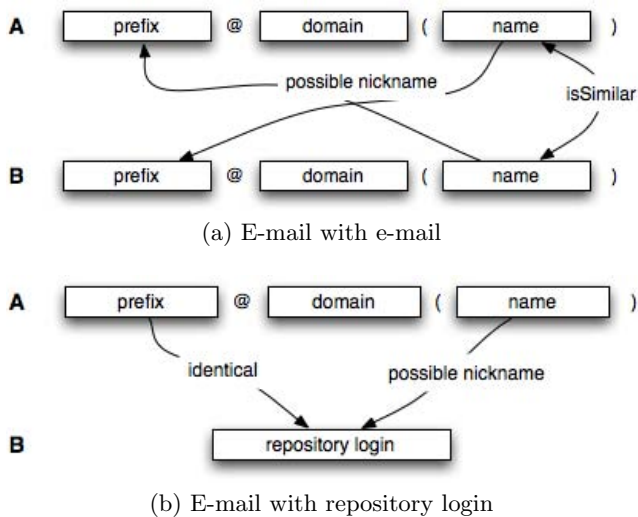


Figure 12: User identity detection

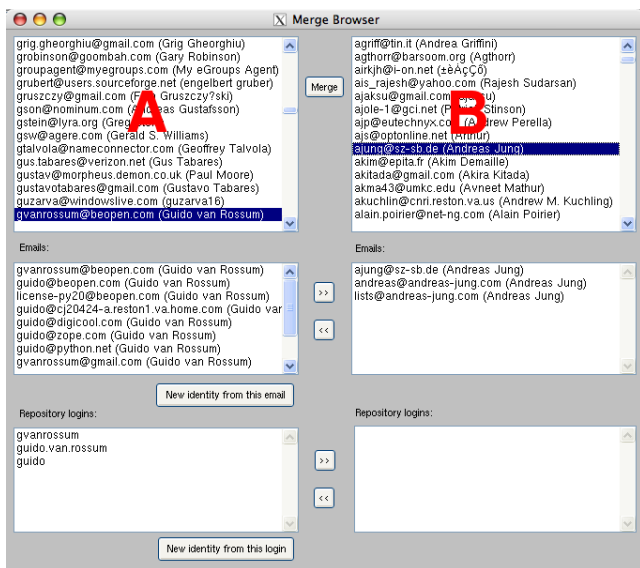


Figure 13: Merge Browser

projects: *Moose*⁵, *Drupal*⁶ and *Python*⁷. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of each studied system.

- *Drupal* was started as an information sharing tool between a small group of students. Its creator probably never expected that his pet project would become so successful. Drupal is implemented in a very popular language for web programming: PHP. The developers of the Drupal-core are of course not PHP beginners but modules and themes can be easily developed by a regular programmer and are easy to deploy. We analyzed the CVS repository of Drupal as well as the

Table 1: General information about Moose, Drupal and Python

	Moose	Drupal	Python
Repository type	Store	CVS	CVS/SVN
#e-mails	2422	32729	88660
#commits	65768	33594	42219
#comitters	227	8	172
#mailinglist users	74	1126	2519
First e-mail	20/04/2007	14/01/2005	21/04/1999
Latest e-mail	17/05/2009	23/05/2009	27/05/2009
First commit	27/04/2001	18/05/2000	09/08/1990
Latest commit	19/05/2009	22/05/2009	27/05/2009

*Drupal-core dev*⁸ mailing list.

- *Python* is a very popular programming language. Designing a programming language is hard and requires many skills. A project like Python cannot be developed by a beginner who just learned to program. The people who are developing and discussing the future of Python are probably highly skilled. We analyzed the *Python-dev*⁹ mailing list, as well as the CVS and SVN version repositories. Initially Python code was stored in CVS, but the developer community decided to migrate at a certain point in time to SVN.
- *Moose* is an academic project developed by researchers, master and bachelor students. The hobbyist programmer probably does not have any interest in contributing to Moose. This makes the project very different from the two others. We analyzed the *Moose-dev*¹⁰ mailing list as well as the Store version repository.

The use of the different visualisations that Maispion provided allows us to make several observations about these three projects. We discuss these in the following subsections.

4.1 General evolution

From Figure 4 we observe (by looking at the red vertical bars) that the overall activity in the Drupal mailing list decreases over time. This behaviour was unexpected. We found that the first major decrease was due to a change in the bug tracking system (up till a certain point in time, every change in the bug tracking system was automatically notified in the mailing list as well) but we did not find any credible reason for the long term decrease of activity.

We did not observe this phenomenon for the Python mailing list activity. On the contrary, we observed that Python gained in popularity between releases 1.5 and 1.6. The mailing lists of both projects see a *wave* of activity before a release. As Moose does not have discrete releases, it is impossible to draw this kind of conclusion for its mailing list.

When we compared the activity in the repositories, we observed that Python and Moose share a similarity; their development slowed down at a certain point in time. For

⁵<http://moose.unibe.ch/>

⁶<http://drupal.org/>

⁷<http://python.org/>

⁸<http://lists.drupal.org/pipermail/development/>

⁹<http://mail.python.org/pipermail/python-dev/>

¹⁰<http://www.iam.unibe.ch/pipermail/moose-dev/>

Moose, this point is February 2007. We do not know what happened and interviewing the maintainers of the project did not shed the light on this activity drop. Python development activity was intense between version 1.6 and version 2.3. After this release, the activity decreased. Both Python and Drupal development see a peak of activity before each release.

4.2 Power law behaviour

An interesting type of behaviour we observed, and which seems to be confirmed by other researchers as well [10] is that open source software development has a power-law behaviour. We observed this, for example, in Figure 8, but the same kind of behaviour was observed as well for the other studied systems. Developers are communicating frequently with a small set of other developers, and only occasionally with the majority of the other developers. A deeper statistical analysis and understanding of this phenomenon, as well as its impact to OSS development is a topic of future research.

4.3 Working hours

After analysing the visualisations of mailing list usage of the three studied systems, a recurrent pattern emerges. As can be expected, the developers are mostly communicating during the day and in the evening. In the base of Python and Moose, developers do not stop talking during weekends; they just slow down their activity. This is not the case with Drupal: its most active day is Sunday.

One difference between Moose and the two other projects is the fact that it is more quiet during holidays while it is the exact opposite for the two others. The academic nature of Moose may explain this phenomenon.

All the repositories show that open source developers continue to work outside office hours. Moose is the only project for which the activity decreases in the evening, Drupal and Python see the exact opposite: people are working in the evening.

4.4 Project sustainability

The problem affecting both Drupal and Python is the fact that they are led by a single individual who oversees the development and guides the project. This is commonly known as the so-called *bus factor*, i.e., the total number of key developers that would, if incapacitated (e.g., by getting hit by a bus), lead to a major disruption of the project. For Python, it is easy to observe this bus factor behaviour, by looking at the Maispion visualisations shown in Figures 9 and 10. They show that there is one extremely active developer, both in terms of commits and e-mails sent. A similar behaviour can be found for Drupal, where its founder continues to be the most active person.¹¹

Fortunately, both projects are well documented and are widely used throughout the world; they are thus sustainable on the technical side. But leadership and vision are two important success factors of these projects. Moose is well known by a relatively large community of academics who have built tools on top of it, its bus factor is thus relatively high. However, all those satellite tools are much less sustainable: they are typically developed by one or two students for a thesis or to support a paper.

¹¹The visualisations that reveal this have not been included in this paper due to lack of space.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This document introduced *Maispion*, a Smalltalk tool for analysing and visualising open source software developer communities. We showed how these visualisations can be applied in practice by analysing three mature open source projects. We have found some interesting communication patterns for these projects, but clearly more work is needed to explore these patterns in more detail, to explain why they appear, and to verify whether other open-source projects reveal similar patterns.

The visualisations provided by *Maispion* are subject to improvement. For example, the visualisations of committer activity (Figure 6) or e-mail usage (Figure 7) do not take into account the frequency of activity over time. An improvement of this visualisation could reveal this information to better explain the concurrent use of e-mail addresses of a same individual.

The information about working hours that we derived from the version repository data is based on the timestamp of commits in the version repository server. This may lead to a significant lack of accuracy when developers working on the open source software project reside in different time zones. For example, because Python has developers working in US, Canada and Europe, the aggregated results about working hours may not be very reliable. We could automatically detect the timezone of an individual based on his e-mail usage: e-mail headers often includes the timezone from which the e-mail was sent. Unfortunately, e-mail clients are inconsistent with this field of the header. The mobility of developers is another problem: they can commit code while they are travelling (if they go to a conference for example) or can move to another country.

In our current study of how software developer teams communicate and what we can learn from that, we have only used information obtained from mailing list and source code version repositories. A natural extension of our work would be to integrate bug tracking data and other relevant data sources as well. [1] have tried to correlate developer communication (obtained from mailing lists) with software quality (expressed in terms of injected bugs in the software). In the future we intend to integrate this kind of data in our tool.

In a general sense, the various types of data extracted by our tool are amenable to statistical analysis, in order to identify certain correlations (for example, between developer communication and coding activity) or to identify certain evolution trends or certain kinds of patterns (such as the observed power law).

Collins-Sussman and Fitzpatrick expressed in their Google Tech Talk that some kinds of behaviour are unwelcome in open source projects [3]. It would be interesting to automatically detect such undesirable behavioral with *Maispion*.

A final important open research question we are faced with is whether the communication patterns we typically find for open source development teams can also be observed in commercial software, and vice versa.

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