Dafny: Statically Verifying Functional Correctness

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Abstract

This report presents the Dafny language and verifier, with a focus on describing the main features of the language, including pre- and postconditions, assertions, loop invariants, termination metrics, quantifiers, predicates and frames. Examples of Dafny code are provided to illustrate the use of each feature, and an overview of how Dafny translates programming code into a mathematical proof of functional verification is presented. The report also includes references to useful resources on Dafny, with mentions of related works in the domain of specification languages.

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1 Introduction

Dafny is both a programming language and a verifier, capable of performing full verification of the functional correctness of a program [1]. Verification is possible due to language-specific features such as pre- and post-conditions, loop invariants, assertions and framing. The Dafny verifier takes care of proving that the code does indeed match its annotations, and thus the burden of writing bug-free code is lifted into that of writing bug-free annotations, with the underlying assumption that annotations are less prone to errors since they are shorter and more direct [2].

The content of this report is structured as follows. Section 2 highlights the motivation and necessity for bug-free code and functional verification, while Section 3 is fully dedicated to the Dafny language and verifier. Section 3.1 describes the main language features which enable the functional verification to occur. Each feature is illustrated with an example written in the Dafny language, where all examples have been created using Dafny version 1.9.1 in the Microsoft Visual Studio Professional 2013 integrated development environment. In Section 3.2, the report touches up on how Dafny goes about generating a mathematical proof of functional correctness from the actual Dafny code. Section 4 is more literature-oriented, with references to good resources for getting started with Dafny and and a mention of similar specification languages. Section 5 then concludes the report by reiterating over the main presented points and summarizing Dafny's advantages and limitations.

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¹This is the latest version of Dafny, which was released only recently on 22 October 2014, and can be downloaded from CodePlex at http://dafny.codeplex.com/ [3].

2 Context

Different software systems perform different tasks and have different requirements, but the one underlying, common requirement is that of having bug-free and functionally-correct code. However, history has shown us that this is not an easy requirement to meet. As can be seen from some of the software failures listed at [4], even systems which have been developed by highly-skilled developers and undergone rigorous testing, such as those at NASA and Microsoft, are in no way immune to bugs.

Functional correctness of a software system is not an easy thing to prove. With testing methodologies such as unit testing, for example, we would need to make sure that the test cases cover all possible paths of execution. Not only is this a huge, and sometimes impossible, task to undertake, but the testing code itself is also prone to errors. While this kind of testing does indeed help in the identification of bugs, it cannot prove that a program is fully functionally correct, as a single, overlooked input could possibly cause a run-time error and bring the entire system down.

Traditionally, full verification has been carried out through the construction of manual proofs or proof assistants which require user interaction [1], but we would like this process to be as automated as possible, to reduce both the effort required and the possibility of errors in the verification stage. This kind of automatic verification can be done with Dafny, which is both a language and verifier, and is able to prove full functional correctness in an automated fashion, while always taking all possible paths of execution into consideration.

3 Dafny

The Dafny language relies on high-level code annotations, which must be explicitly written up by the developer, and the verifier then takes care of checking that the code does indeed match the annotations. Not only this, but Dafny also proves code termination in the case of loops and recursion, and the absence of run-time errors in general, "such as index out of bounds, null dereferences, division by zero, etc." [2]. Dafny is therefore capable of giving a very strong guarantee regarding the functional correctness of a piece of annotated code.

The Dafny verifier performs static verification of the code, and code which is not verifiable will not compile. Conversely, compiled code is always guaranteed to have passed the verification stage. Perhaps one of the best features of Dafny is that the developer is only required to produce the correct annotations. Once the annotations are in place, no user interaction is required to generate the proof of functional correctness.

3.1 Language Features

The Dafny language itself is an imperative and sequential, class-based language, with support for variables, generic types, loops and conditional statements.

The main types are: int for integers, nat for natural numbers, bool for booleans, set<T> and seq<T> for immutable sets and sequences of values of the generic type T, respectively, array<T>,array2<T>,...,arrayn<T> for n-dimensional arrays, and user-defined classes and inductive datatypes [2]. The built-in object type is a supertype of all class types, and, one of the major features of the latest release is the added support for char and string types [5].

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```
method MethodSkeleton(inParamName: <inParamType>, ...)
        returns (outParamName: <outParamType>,...)
    requires <Precondition>;
    modifies <Frame>;
    ensures <Postcondition>;
    decreases <Rank>;
{
        <MethodBody>
}
```

Listing 2: Skeleton for a Dafny function.

3.1.1 Methods, Functions and Function Methods

Methods are one of the basic units of a Dafny program, and the skeleton for a Dafny method is presented in Listing 1. The first thing that stands out is the support for annotations such as requires and ensures. However, I would like to point out two other, perhaps more subtle, interesting specification details. Firstly, note that the method allows for multiple return values (something which is very much to my personal liking as I believe it can be handy in programming scenarios were one has to resort to the use of tuples or objects). In Dafny, returning values from a method involves assigning a value to these output variables before the method returns. Secondly, the return values are not only typed but also named, and this allows us to easily refer to them in our annotations.

One other important specification detail, which cannot be inferred from Listing 1, is that the input parameters are read-only. This is important because Dafny will use preconditions on these parameters to verify the code for all possible executions of the program, and therefore all possible parameter values, and this kind verification would not be possible if the method were free to change the input parameters at its own will.

The <MethodBody> can be arbitrarily long and it is verified to make sure that it satisfies all of the method's annotations. However, when the method is being used from other methods, Dafny "forgets" [2] about its body and considers the postconditions (denoted by ensures) to be the only thing it knows about this method. Thus we can see the method annotations as "fixing the behavior of the method" [2]. This significantly simplifies the verification process and allows Dafny "to operate at reasonable speeds" [2].

As seen in Listing 2, **functions** in Dafny are somewhat similar to methods in that they also can make use of input parameters and annotations. However, this is where the similarity ends, as functions in Dafny follow more closely the notion of a mathematical function: they cannot write to

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memory and have a single, unnamed return value.

Unlike method bodies, the body of a function is *not* forgotten during verification, and this allows functions to be used directly in annotations. However, a function body cannot contain more than one expression (note <UnaryExpression> in Listing 2 versus <MethodBody> in Listing 1), and we will come back to this distinction in Section 3.1.3, with code samples of verifiable and non-verifiable annotations.

Functions also introduce the concept of **ghosting**. Both variables and functions can be ghosted, and while the Dafny verifier makes no distinction between regular and ghost fields, ghosts are completely ignored by the compiler. Functions and other ghosted variables are therefore only used during the verification stage, and have no affect on the execution speed or memory space of the final, executable code. If the code of a function does need to be used by runnable code, we can easily change it to a **function method** and it will be included in the compiled program. In my opinion, ghosting is one of the nicest features of Dafny, as it allows for static verification to occur without affecting the performance of the code at run-time.

3.1.2 Pre- and Postconditions

Preconditions and postconditions are boolean expressions which are annotated with requires and ensures, respectively, and are included as part of a method or function's declaration, as seen in Listings 1 and 2. Preconditions must hold before method execution, and postconditions must hold after the method returns. As clearly explained in [1], "It is the caller's responsibility to establish the precondition[s] and the implementation's responsibility to establish the postcondition[s]." Dafny will make sure the postconditions hold for all possible invocations of the program, assuming the preconditions are met, and I will illustrate this better through the use of an example.

Let's say we would like a method for calculating the cost of a visit to Edinburgh Castle based on the number of adults and number of children in a group. As a precondition, we require that children must be accompanied by at least one adult. Thus, since there will be at least one adult in the group, we add the postcondition that the total fee will always be greater than 0. This fictitious fee calculator can be seen in Figure 1.²

In fact, this Dafny code does not compile, and the debugger provides us with an example invocation which will cause the postcondition to fail, with numChildren = -2. This postcondition will in fact fail whenever the numChildren parameter has a negative value. There are two ways in which we can fix this: either add another precondition to ensure the parameter is never less than zero (requires numChildren >= 0), or change the type of the parameter to nat.

This example, although simplistic, brings out an important distinction between comments and annotations. Although initially the assumption of a non-negative fee might have seemed reasonable, it was easy to miss the case of having a negative number of children, especially since in real life such a value would not make sense. By putting an observation about a method in a comment, we have no way of knowing whether the method actually has this property or not. Not only this, but when a method is updated we have no guarantee that the corresponding comments will be updated to match the new functionality. Using annotations, any code updates causing any postcondition to fail will prevent the code from compiling until the annotations are updated to reflect the new code, or, if necessary, the code is fixed to make sure that the postconditions still hold.

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²Going forward, the report continues building up on this example by adding further functionality, and the complete, compilable source code can be found in the Appendix.

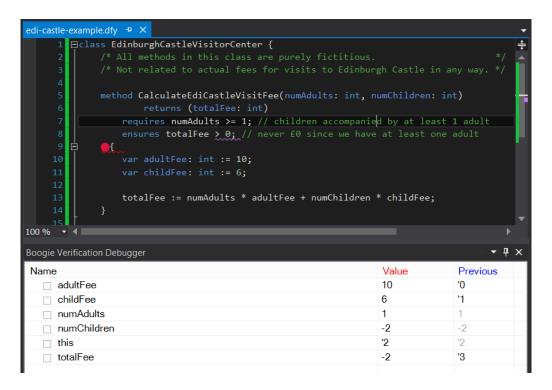


Figure 1: Screenshot of Dafny code with the verifier in action, highlighting a postcondition that does not hold, and showing an example invocation for which the postcondition fails.

Listing 3: Sample assertions on the method presented in Figure 1.

```
var totalFee := CalculateEdiCastleVisitFee(2, 2); // 10 * 2 + 6 * 2 = 32
assert(totalFee > 0); // assertion 1 - verifiable
assert(totalFee == 32); // assertion 2 - non-verifiable
```

3.1.3 Assertions

Similar to pre- and postconditions, assertions are also expressions evaluating to a boolean value. Assertions are however placed in the middle of a method, and they are used to confirm that "a particular expression always holds when control reaches that part of the code" [2].

Let's say I want to create some assertions on the output of the CalculateEdiCastleVisitFee() method, as seen in Listing 3. As indicated by the comments, the first assertion can be verified by Dafny, and this is due to the postcondition which ensures the fee is always greater than zero. Dafny cannot, however, verify the second assertion, even though we know this to be true. This is because Dafny's knowledge of the method is limited to its annotations, as explained in Section 3.1.1, and it therefore has no way of knowing that the totalFee value will actually be 32.

On the other hand, Dafny can verify both assertions in Listing 4, since it can use the body of the function method for verification. Note that, as in assertion 4 of Listing 4, functions can also be used directly in assertions, without having to assign their return value to to a parameter. This is not possible for methods since a method can have multiple return values.

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Listing 4: A new function method and corresponding, verifiable assertions.

```
function method GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(isWeekday: bool) : nat
{
   if (isWeekday) then 22 else 27
}

var familyTicketWeekday := GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(true);
assert familyTicketWeekday == 22; // assertion 3 - verifiable
assert GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(false) == 27; // assertion 4 - verifiable
```

Listing 5: A Dafny method which uses a loop to keep track of the number of assigned audio guides.

```
method AssignAudioGuides(numPeople: nat, numAvailableGuides: nat)
    returns (remainingGuides: nat)
    requires (numAvailableGuides >= numPeople);
{
    var numAssignedGuides := 0;
    while (numAssignedGuides < numPeople)
    {
        numAssignedGuides := numAssignedGuides + 1;
    }
    assert numAssignedGuides == numPeople; // assertion 5 - non-verifiable
    remainingGuides := (numAvailableGuides - numAssignedGuides);
}</pre>
```

3.1.4 Loop Invariants and Termination Metrics

Loops pose a problem for Dafny because it is not possible to know in advance how many times the code inside the loop will be executed, but the verifier needs to consider all possible paths of code execution. Loop invariants are another form of annotations available in Dafny, which enable to the verifier to work with loops. As for the previously seen annotations, loop invariants are also boolean expressions. Loop invariants must hold *before* entering the loop, and *for every execution* of the loop. When trying to prove assertions after the execution of a loop, Dafny only takes into consideration the loop's guard (condition), and its invariants. The loop body is not taken into consideration, similar to how a method's body is ignored when outside of the method. In other words, when a loop exits, Dafny will only know that the loop guard failed and that the invariant still holds.

For example, consider the Dafny method in Listing 5, which keeps track of the number guides assigned to people in a very simplistic loop. The method's precondition ensures that there are enough audio guides for everybody, and thus after loop execution it should be easy to confirm that the number of assigned audio guides is equal to the number of people. However, Dafny cannot verify this assertion because it knows nothing about the body of the loop, or in other words, Dafny sees the loop body as a black box. After loop execution, all it knows at the assertion point is that the loop guard has failed, meaning that numAssignedGuides >= numPeople, but has no way of proving that numAssignedGuides == numPeople.

For Dafny to be able to verify the assertion, we add the loop invariant in Listing 6 and this, together with the loop guard, is enough for Dafny to be able to proof that numAssignedGuides will

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Listing 6: The loop invariant required for the verification of assertion 5 in Listing 5.

```
while (numAssignedGuides < numPeople)
   invariant numAssignedGuides <= numPeople;
{
   ...
}</pre>
```

Listing 7: The termination measure required for proving that the code in Listings 5 and 6 terminates.

```
while (numAssignedGuides < numPeople)
   invariant numAssignedGuides <= numPeople;
   decreases numPeople - numAssignedGuides;
{
   ...
}</pre>
```

contain the correct value after loop execution. Note how the loop invariant uses \leq and not \leq , like the loop guard. This is because the loop invariant must hold for *all* executions of the loop, even for the very last one when the loop condition fails and the loop exits.

In the Appendix, I also include a VerifyAdults() method which requires the use of a slightly more complex loop invariant to verify an assertion. (The assertion makes use an existential quantifier, which will be introduced in the next section.)

In the case of loops and recursive functions or methods, Dafny also proves **termination**, and this can be done in one of two ways: either with the use of an explicit **decreases** annotation, or by a correct guess from Dafny. For a **decreases** annotation, Dafny proves two things: that the expression does indeed get smaller, and that it is bounded.

Note that the code provided in Listings 5 and 6 does not use a decreases annotation, but Dafny was still able to verify its termination. This is because the loop has a common form and thus allows Dafny to guess the correct termination measure [6]. Alternatively, we could explicitly add the decreases annotation shown in Listing 7, which is the same as that which will be guessed by Dafny.

3.1.5 Quantifiers, Predicates and Frames

There are two **quantifiers** in Dafny: **forall** and **exists**. The **forall** quantifier corresponds to the universal quantifier in predicate logic, \forall , and can be used to check whether a property holds for all elements of an array or data structure. The **exists** quantifier corresponds to the existential quantifier, \exists , and can be used to check whether a property holds for at least one element in an array or data structure. A **predicate** in Dafny is simply a function that returns a boolean value. Listing 8 shows an example of a predicate whose unary expression makes use of an existential quantifier. It is important to note that we would not have been able to create this predicate if Dafny did not allow for quantification, as we would have had to loop through the elements of the array one by one, and function bodies can only contain one expression.

The code in Listing 8, however, does not compile. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, visitorsAges.Length could cause a run-time error if visitorsAges is null, and thus the Dafny verifier is unable to prove the absence of run-time errors. This can be fixed by adding a function precondition to make sure that the array is always instantiated.

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Listing 8: A predicate function making use of an existential quantifier.

```
function ChildPresent(visitorsAges: array<int>): bool
{
    // non-verifiable
    exists i :: 0 <= i < visitorsAges.Length ==> visitorsAges[i] < 18
}</pre>
```

Listing 9: An updated, compilable version of the predicate in Listing 8.

```
function ChildPresent(visitorsAges: array<int>): bool
    requires visitorsAges != null; //prevent "target object may be null"
    reads visitorsAges; //prevent "insufficient read clause"
{
    exists i :: 0 <= i < visitorsAges.Length ==> visitorsAges[i] < 18
}</pre>
```

Secondly, the array access at visitorsAges[i] causes the following error: "insufficient reads clause to read array element". This is because we have not included the array in the function's so-called reading frame. A reads annotation, unlike the other annotations we have seen so far, is not a boolean expression, but a set of memory locations that the function has access to. When writing a function or a predicate, reading frames are important because we need to know whether a predicate still holds after changes to certain memory locations are made. So, by adding the reads annotation for the visitorsAges array, we not only allow the function to read from the array's memory locations, but also imply that the predicate might no longer hold if changes to the array are made, which is what we desire. The compilable version of the ChildPresent predicate can be seen in Listing 9.

Methods, on the other hand, can read from any memory location they like, without the need for a reads annotation. However, any memory locations a method needs to write to must be listed in a modifies annotation. This annotation, similar to reads, also takes a set of memory locations, and is used to specify a method's writing frame. The read and modifies clauses are what enable Dafny's dynamic frames [7]. Through reading and writing frames, arbitrary memory modifications are limited to something Dafny can reason about, allowing the verifier to work on one method at a time [2], and thus allowing for modular verification, meaning that "separate verification of each part of the program implies the correctness of the whole program" [1].

3.2 From Code to Verification

In the previous section we went over some of the main features of the Dafny language, but we have not yet described how the verifier goes about generating a mathematical proof of functional correctness. We will not go over this in detail in this report, but the high-level process is as follows.

The Dafny verifier actually translates the Dafny code into the intermediate verification language Boogie 2. The Boogie tool then generates first-order verification conditions from the intermediate program using the concept of weakest preconditions [7], and passes these verification conditions on to the Z3 SMT (satisfiability-modulo-theories) solver. In this way, correctness of the Boogie program implies correctness of the original Dafny program [1]. Going back to Figure 1, one can notice that it is the "Boogie Verification Debugger" which presents us with the counterexample.

SMT-based program verifiers are fully automatic, meaning that they require no user interaction,

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and thus this translation approach allows the functional verification of a Dafny program to occur through the use of a powerful and state-of-the-art SMT, while still keeping the interaction required by the programmer limited to the programming domain [1]. This approach, however, still has its limitation, as the power of the programming language is limited to the power of the intermediate verification language. For example, in [1] we see that, although Z3 provides support for algebraic datatypes, Boogie does not, and so there is no way for Dafny to tap into that support.

4 Resources and Related Works

For anyone wanting a practical introduction to Dafny, I would suggest having a look at the online tutorial at http://rise4fun.com/Dafny/tutorial/guide [8]. The contents are very similar to those of the paper cited as [2], although [2] also includes a handy "Dafny Quick Reference" appendix. The online version however has the advantage of having an interactive panel, allowing the user to try Dafny in the web browser itself, without the need for any installations. The online tutorial also contains useful links to other tutorials on language features such as Sets, Termination [6] and Lemmas.

The lecture notes from the 2008 Marktoberdorf summer school, [7], are more mathematical-oriented, as they go into the details of Dafny's logical encoding and the translation from Dafny to Boogie. They are more focused on explaining how to build a first-order automatic program verifier, than on how to actually use the Dafny language. Nonetheless, they give good insight to some of the design decisions which where taken during the early design stages for Dafny. One must however keep in mind that a lot of progress has been made on Dafny since 2008, and some of the statements in [7] no longer hold. For example, at the time of writing of [7], Dafny had no support for higher-order functions, but these have now been included as a new language feature in Dafny 1.9.1 [5]. Similarly, Dafny's current type system is very different from that presented in [7]; it now supports a much larger set of types, as can be seen from the latest version's type system documentation at http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/um/people/leino/papers/krml243.html [9].

Another interesting paper is [1]. This contains an overview of some of Dafny's language features, and also includes a full functional specification of the Schorr-Waite algorithm in Dafny. Interestingly, in [1], Leino points out that, at the time of writing, the 120 lines of Dafny code for the algorithm were the shortest mechanical-verifier input to date, with the closest, shortest implementation being 400 lines of Isabelle proof scripts. It was also the first Schorr-Waite proof to be carried out solely by an SMT-solver, and verfication took only 5 seconds. However, Leino himself, who is the principal researcher behind Dafny, admits in [1] that coming up with the proof was not an easy task, especially considering the "mouthful" of requried invariants, and concludes that the "task is not yet for non-experts" [1]. This, in my opinion is one of Dafny's limitations, as it indicates that it is not always the case that writing bug-free annotations is easier than writing bug-free code.

In [1], Leino also gives a good reference to a number of related works, namely specification languages, and how they compare to Dafny. These include the Java Modeling Language (JML), Spec# and VeriCool 1. JML and Spec# both make use of *pure methods* instead of mathematical functions, and Leino indicates that these are much harder to get right, going as far as to include the slogan "pure methods are hard, functions are easy" [1]. VeriCool 1 inspired the use of dynamic frames in Dafny, and the languages share various similarities, but differ in the way ghost variables are handled, where Dafny's specification avoids problems with recursive functions [1].

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5 Conclusion

Dafny originally started out as an exercise in encoding dynamic frames, and has now developed into a general-purpose programming language and a static verifier for functional correctness [1].

Personally, I think one of the main advantages of the Dafny verifier is that the programmer can interact with it in much the same way as with the compiler. The Dafny language syntax itself is not difficult to get used to, as it is quite similar to other languages, such as Java and C#. Also, through ghosting, one can include verification code without affecting the performance of the executable program itself. Another advantage is that Dafny is both concise and fast, as shown for example through the implementation of the Schorr-Waite algorithm in [1].

On the other hand, some limitations of Dafny include the fact that its support is limited to what can be represented in the intermediate verification language Boogie 2. Also, while coming up with the required annotations for toy examples is easy, this process gets more and more difficult as the code gets more complex, and this was also demonstrated in [1]. Also, the fact that, for example, support for "string" and "char" types has just been added in the latest version, indicates that there is still a long way to go if Dafny is to be used for the implementation of large-scale systems.

However, a significant number of features have already been added to the original Dafny version presented in the original lecture notes [7]. Development of the language and verifier is still active and ongoing, as shown by the fact that the latest version was released just over two weeks ago in October 2014; and, all in all, I believe that Dafny has proved itself to be a very promising tool for the automatic, statical verification of full functional correctness of programming code.

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Appendix

```
class EdinburghCastleVisitorCenter {
    /* All methods in this class are purely fictitious.
    /* Not related to actual fees for visits to Edinburgh Castle in any
       way. */
    method CalculateEdiCastleVisitFee(numAdults: nat, numChildren: nat)
            returns (totalFee: int)
        requires numAdults >= 1; // children accompanied by at least 1
           adult
       ensures totalFee > 0; // never £0 since we have at least one adult
    {
       var adultFee: int := 10;
       var childFee: int := 6;
       totalFee := numAdults * adultFee + numChildren * childFee;
    }
    function method GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(isWeekday: bool) : nat
        if isWeekday then 22 else 27
    }
   method FamilyTicketVerification()
       var numAdults := 2; // type inference
       var numChildren := 2;
       var totalFee := CalculateEdiCastleVisitFee(numAdults, numChildren)
        // totalFee = 10 * 2 + 6 * 2 = 32
        assert(totalFee > 0); // possible because of postcondition
        //assert(totalFee == 32); // cannot verify, no related
           postcondition
        var familyTicketWeekday := GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(true);
        assert familyTicketWeekday == 22;
        // function can also use directly in annotations
        assert GetDiscountedFamilyTicket(false) == 27;
   }
   method AssignAudioGuides(numPeople: nat, numAvailableGuides: nat)
            returns (remainingGuides: nat)
       requires (numAvailableGuides >= numPeople);
    ₹
       var numAssignedGuides := 0;
        while (numAssignedGuides < numPeople)
            invariant numAssignedGuides <= numPeople;</pre>
            decreases numPeople - numAssignedGuides; // not necessary (
               Dafny can guess)
```

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```
{
        numAssignedGuides := numAssignedGuides + 1;
    }
    assert numAssignedGuides == numPeople; // fails without invariant
    remainingGuides := (numAvailableGuides - numAssignedGuides);
}
method VerifyAdults(adultAges: array<int>) returns (allAdults: bool)
    requires (adultAges != null); // cannot access "Length" without
       this
₹
    var index := 0;
    while (index < adultAges.Length)</pre>
        decreases (adultAges.Length - index);
        invariant index <= adultAges.Length;</pre>
        invariant forall i :: 0 <= i < index ==> adultAges[i] >= 18;
        // without the last invariant,
        // Dafny has no way of knowing we checked all "previous"
           values
    {
        if (adultAges[index] < 18)</pre>
        {
            allAdults := false;
            break;
        }
        index := index + 1;
    }
    if (allAdults)
        assert forall i :: 0 <= i < adultAges.Length ==> adultAges[i]
           >= 18; // fails without "forall" invariant
    }
}
// predicate
function ChildPresent(visitorsAges: array<int>): bool
    requires visitorsAges != null; // prevent "target object may be
       null"
    reads visitorsAges; // prevent "insufficient read clause"
    exists i :: 0 <= i < visitorsAges.Length ==> visitorsAges[i] < 18
}
```

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}