

SHF: Small: Feedback-Driven Mutation Testing for Any Language

1 Overview and Objectives

1.1 Problem Statement

The core problem this project aims to address is making the use of program mutants practical in non-research settings, in a way that meets developers’ or test engineers’ needs; that is, making it possible for someone creating or enhancing a test suite, or developing code and test suite in tandem, to (1) use “just enough” mutation testing for their needs, maximizing benefit gained in exchange for work performed, (2) work in any programming language without worrying about the quality of tool support provided for mutation testing, and without sacrificing the ease of understanding of source-based mutants, while easily adding custom mutation operators that target their specific software development task. More generally, this project aims to make use of the insights of Test-Driven-Development (TDD), and proposes using mutation testing to move beyond a paradigm where developers build a series of tests narrowly tailored to steps in development, and use Mutation-Driven-Development (MDD) to build automated test generators or verification harnesses that handle not only anticipated problems imagined during development, but problems not anticipated by human insight, discovered using mutation-based analysis. In addition to traditional manual testing, our approach targets both highly-general property-driven testing and even full formal verification of software components, in order to be practical in the future, where software systems will often be so safety- or mission- critical that even “good” manual testing is not an acceptable approach to ensuring correctness, security, and reliability.

1.1.1 Just Enough Mutation Testing: Feedback-Driven Mutation Testing

Most mutation testing work focuses on computing a mutation score or, at least, the set of unkilld (and perhaps non-equivalent) mutants. Using mutation testing tools involves running many tests on many modified versions of a software system, and, for larger projects or more expensive test suites, requires substantial computing resources, making reducing that need a major thrust of mutation testing research [52]. However, as useful as knowing the overall quality of a test suite may be, the most practical goal of mutation testing is to improve a test suite. For this purpose, an expensive-to-generate list of all unkilld mutants is not really what users need or want. A list of unkilld mutants contains uninteresting mutants (many, but not all, equivalent mutants), numerous redundant mutants (that can be killed by the same extension of the test suite, or rejected as uninteresting for the same reason), and a smaller number of actionable, representative mutants that are maximally effective in guiding improvement of a testing effort. Examining all unkilld mutants is only practical for formal verification efforts or very high-powered test suites and critical software systems that motivate such efforts. In our own work on using mutants to drive formal verification and automated testing [38, 42, 3] we note that examining surviving mutants was a time-consuming and unpleasant task, even in these settings. With a larger number of unkilld mutants, the problem becomes one very much like the bug triage or “fuzzer taming” problem in random testing/fuzzing [16, 87]: a user wants to quickly find mutants that indicate the most important “holes” in a testing or verification effort, and act on those most-critical gaps, possibly revealing faults in the System Under Test (SUT).

What a user really wants is a tool that presents a few very different, ranked, mutants, all likely to be of interest, and revises the presented mutants and their ranking based on actions taken by the user — adding tests, fixing faults, marking certain mutants as equivalent or uninteresting, and perhaps assigning a priority and severity to both killed or dismissed mutants and any remaining un-handled mutants. However, current mutation testing approaches make no real effort, with few exceptions [79, 13] to prioritize mutants, and none are based on a user-centered feedback loop, where the user and mutation testing framework interact to improve a test suite, automated test generator, or verification harness — and, of course, improve the SUT as well. To our knowledge, in fact, other than some efforts to incorporate dominance results [76], no approaches

currently suggest any more sophisticated way to maximize the novelty of presented mutants than stratified sampling.

Problem: Develop highly automated methods and tools that allow the practical application of mutation testing in a feedback-driven way, where user and mutation testing framework cooperate to improve testing efforts, while minimizing user effort and maximizing the ability to quickly find the most important weaknesses of a test suite, automated test generation system, or formal verification effort.

1.1.2 Any-Language Mutation Testing

Problem: Provide high-quality mutation generation support to be used in a maximally flexible but still efficient mutation testing framework that can be applied to (essentially) any language, such that adding project-specific novel mutation operators, or even adding support for a new language (e.g. a DSL used in a single project) is possible for non-expert users.

1.1.3 Mutation-Driven Development

1.2 PI Qualifications

PI Groce has been a user of, and contributor to, mutation testing tools for many years. He combines a long research track record in software testing, including mutation testing, with actual experience testing critical software systems at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory. PI Groce’s long-running interest in improving the state-of-the-art in mutation testing dates from frustration in his efforts to apply mutation tools to the testing and verification effort for the Mars Science Laboratory’s flight software, in particular to the file system [32, 33, 37]. This practical orientation informs recent work on using mutation testing in a falsification-driven approach to improving high-end verification and automated testing efforts [38, 42, 3]. PI Groce has extensive experience in developing mutation tools for new languages [57, 62, 43], including the first reliable tools for mutation of Haskell, Python, and Swift, as well as in user-facing (vs. researcher-oriented) automated software testing tools [46, 23].

1.3 Intellectual Merit

This work addresses core problems not limited to practical application of mutation testing to improve test efforts in a user-centered way, but generalizeable to fundamental issues in software engineering and program semantics. E.g., how can we represent program changes and (mostly statically) predict the similarity of their impact on program semantics, and which tests are likely to detect these changes. How can novelty of information presented to a user be effectively balanced with a-priori predictions of the utility of that information, where likely-high-utility data points may also be unfortunately similar to each other? How can user feedback be incorporated into such efforts without over-burdening human users? This project also considers connections raised by our preliminary work, concerning effective methodologies for program and testing/verification effort development. Can theoretical ideas about the nature of scientific discovery [80, 81, 54] be applied to such efforts? Is falsification by alternative hypotheses about the correctness of a system or power of a testing/verification effort translatable to an actionable, effective approach for building systems [38, 42]? The work on any-language mutation testing looks at syntactic patterns common to almost all programming languages, and relies on categorizing languages into families based on similarity, and how they share common meaningful syntactic changes that translate to interesting semantic changes.

2 Background and Preliminary Research

2.1 Falsification-Driven Verification and Testing

2.2 Furthest Point First and Fuzzer Taming

An unkillable mutant is, conceptually, very similar to a failing test. It presents information of possible relevance to a developer or test engineer. The mutant or test *may* indicate the presence of a previously unknown fault that needs to be fixed, either in the SUT or in the test suite/test generator. It may indicate the presence of a previously unknown fault of less importance. It may also indicate an even less interesting result: an equivalent mutant or a failure of an inherently flaky test. Or, in many cases, an unkillable mutant or failing test may contain information that is either important or unimportant, but is uninteresting because *it duplicates information already presented for understanding*. While examining an equivalent mutant is not always useless (e.g., it may indicate an opportunity for refactoring or improving the efficiency of code [49, 42]), examining a mutant that is equivalent to or extremely similar to an already-understood mutant is almost never worthwhile — even if the original mutant provided important, actionable information. That information has already been incorporated into the development or testing process.

Fuzzer taming [16] was a solution we proposed to the problem of triaging test failures in automated test generation. In compiler testing and other fuzzing applications, a core usability issue is that tools tend to produce very large numbers of failing tests for a much smaller number of distinct bugs. Finding the set of distinct bugs, and identifying important bugs that need to be fixed immediately is difficult, because the important bugs may be represented by only one or two failing tests in a set of thousands of failing tests, most of which are duplicates.

3 Research Plan

3.1 Core Research Questions

3.1.1 Research Questions Related to Feedback-Driven Mutation

1. How can we form a generalized, language-agnostic representation of and distance metric for program mutants for use in FPF?
2. How can we incorporate feedback from users into the representation and distance metric?
3. How can we set budgets for automated test generation and timeouts for verification efforts to quickly estimate whether a mutant is killable?
4. How can we most effectively use already generated killing tests and counterexamples to prune mutants?
5. Is distance-based clustering plus timing information useful for quickly eliminating killable mutants similar to already-killed mutants? How does this relate to Predictive Mutation Testing (PMT)?
6. How can we balance FPF-based selection of mutants for novelty with predictions of mutant equivalence, outcome, dominance, and productivity?
7. How can we identify outliers in otherwise similar groups of mutants, and is such identification useful?
8. Can we predict whether a mutant’s unkillability is due to poor test generation or due to oracle weakness?

3.1.2 Research Questions Related to Any-Language Mutation

1. How can we maximize the efficiency and usability of a fundamentally language-agnostic regular-expression-based approach to mutant generation?
2. How can we extend the language of regular expressions to allow for language-agnostic definition of mutation operators that require more parsing-like analysis of code structure, without compromising the usability and simplicity of the approach?
3. Is it possible to perform on-the-fly mutant generation for very large projects, and reconcile this approach with FPF (e.g., generate new mutants with, possibly approximate, desired distances from already evaluated mutants)?

3.2 Work and Evaluation Plans

3.2.1 Evaluation Plan

4 Related Work

4.1 Bug Triage and Distance Metrics in Software Engineering

A fundamental insight of this proposal is that the problem of presenting mutants to a user is conceptually similar to the “fuzzer taming”/crash bucketing/bug triage problem studied in automated testing research [16, 87]. Our approach is centered on the idea of computing distances between mutants. The use of distance metrics in software engineering for a variety of purposes is long-standing. To our knowledge, almost all such uses are essentially spectrum-based [83] (that is, using counts of coverage of code entities), except for some work in model-checking [29, 12] and some of the metrics in our recent fuzzer taming work [16]. Reneiris and Reiss initially proposed using distance between executions to localize faults [82], and Liu and Han [61], among others have followed this line with various metrics (in their case, using the localization of a spectrum-based method to determine distance). Vangala et al. proposed using distance to cluster test cases to improve diversity and eliminate duplicates [88]. Methods for clustering to identify bugs all rely on an implicit distance determined by a feature set [22]. Our own previous work has used distance metrics for a variety of purposes [16, 36, 94]. Adaptive random testing uses distances (usually between inputs, not executions, however) to choose tests [14, 15, 8]. Recently, we proposed a novel, causal metric for fuzzer taming and fault localization, itself based on mutation testing results [45].

4.2 Mutation Testing

There is a vast body of work on mutation testing or analysis. Mathur attributes [64] the original idea for mutation analysis to a term paper by Richard Lipton in 1970. Foundational assumptions and theory were first proposed by DeMillo et al. [18], and the approach was first implemented by Budd et al. [11] in 1980. Mutation analysis as a theory relies on two fundamental assumptions — *the competent programmer hypothesis*, and *the coupling effect*, both of which have been widely studied [89, 90, 27, 71, 72, 56, 27, 24]. In this project, we are more interested in the practical effectiveness of mutation testing than in theoretical justifications.

It has long been argued [10] that mutation analysis is *stronger* than other coverage measures. The subsumption of multiple coverage measures by mutation analysis, including all the basic coverage measures [68] was shown by Offutt [74], and data flow subsumption was demonstrated by Mathur [66]. Daran et al. [17] found that mutation analysis produces faults that are similar to actual faults in terms of the error traces produced. Andrews et al. [6, 7] found that ease of detection of mutants was similar to that of real faults when compared to manually generated faults (in that manually generated faults were harder to find). Recent research by Just et al. [53] using 357 real faults showed that in 75% of cases, mutation score and test case effectiveness improved together, which is a strong relationship compared to the same coupling for coverage (46%). More recently, Papadakis et. al [78] showed in a large scale study that while there is a real relationship between mutation, it is in some sense weak; indeed they summarize their work by stating that “mutants provide good guidance for improving the fault detection of test suites, but their correlation with fault detection [is] weak,” which is a foundational assumption of this proposal. Ahmed et al., using a very different approach, reached a similar conclusion about the potentially high value for suite improvement, but weak correlation of mutation analysis results [2].

Cost of execution is often [52] considered to be the most problematic aspect of practical mutation testing. Numerous approaches exist, that seek to reduce the cost of mutation analysis. Offutt and Untch [73] categorize these, as: *do fewer*, *do smarter*, and *do faster* approaches. Operator selection, mutant sampling, and mutant clustering fall under *do fewer* — approaches that seek to reduce the number of mutants evaluated. The *do smarter* approaches seek to reduce the time taken for the entire mutation analysis by intelligently managing

the various phases. Similarly, *do faster* approaches seek to reduce the time taken for evaluation of a single mutant, and include mutant schema generation, code patching, and other methods.

The *do fewer* approaches, especially simple random sampling, debuted with the initial research in mutation analysis [10, 1], where it was noticed that even a 10% random sample of mutants can on average be almost as effective (99%) as the complete set of mutants.. Sampling was further investigated by Mathur [63], Wong et al. [91, 92], and Offutt et al. [75].

Determining relative merits of selective mutation strategies such as operator selection and random sampling has long been an active field of research [92, 67, 98] Skew in fault representativeness among mutants was initially noticed by Budd et al. [10] who found that particular types of mutants are representative for particular kinds of faults. Constrained mutation was pioneered by Mathur [63, 65] and was further investigated by Wong et al. [93]. An extension of this approach called *n*-selection was suggested by Offutt et al. [75] where the most numerous mutation operators were removed one at a time. A set of guidelines for operator selection was identified and evaluated by Barbosa et al.[9]. Namin et al. [69, 70] formulated the concept of *sufficient mutation operators*, and Untch [86] even proposed simply using statement deletion as “the” mutation operator. Deng et al. [19] extended the deletion operator for diverse language elements, and obtained an effectiveness of 92% while reducing the number of mutants by 80%.

The subsumption of individual mutants and mutation operators is also an active area of research [25, 84, 60]. Higher order mutants (HOM) aim to improve the quality of mutants by combining simpler mutants into more complex mutants. Jia et al. [51, 50], found that the number of mutants can be reduced by 50% by making use of subsumption of simpler mutants by higher order mutants. Mutation clustering[20, 85, 48] is another *do-fewer* approach where similar mutants are identified based on various properties.

There has been extensive work on comparison of mutation reduction strategies [98, 97]. Zhang et al. [95] investigated the scalability of selective mutation by considering how well a randomly sampled set of mutants represent the original population. In our own previous work [26] we showed that there is an upper bound on the improvement in *mean effectiveness* that is possible using even an ideal mutation reduction strategy using post-hoc oracular knowledge of mutant kills. We later extended that result by evaluating the actual improvement achieved by extant mutation reduction strategies, when they do not unrealistically have access to the mutant kills achieved [28]. Recent work on Predictive Mutation Testing (PMT) [96] applies machine learning to build a model that can predict mutation results without actually running mutation testing, a novel and promising *do-smarter* approach.

4.2.1 Practical Mutation Analysis

The above work largely focuses on computing or at least estimating the total mutation score of a test suite, efficiently. The assumption is that mutation testing is meant to be, like a coverage metric, a kind of “evaluation” of a test suite, a number used to say “this is a good test suite” or at least “this is a better test suite than that test suite.” While important for some real-world purposes (evaluating QA efforts) and certainly for software testing research, that is not the focus of this proposal. Instead, we consider the problem of presenting unkilld mutations to a developer or test engineer in a way that facilitates the improvement of a test suite and the detection of faults. This is inspired by our previous work on using mutation to find defects in formal verification and automated test generation efforts [38, 42, 3].

Very recent work by Papadakis et al. (some unpublished in a conference or journal at the time this proposal was written) has aimed, unusually, at predicting the “quality” of [76] or even prioritizing [13] mutants, to rank fault-revealing mutants highly so that users can produce tests to find faults. This work is highly relevant to our aims, but focuses on a single static pass to rank mutants by their fault-revealing potential, informed by (possibly cross-project) data on fault-revealing tests. There is no feedback loop, or ability to indicate the importance of various faults in the program under test, and the language support issue is dodged by targeting LLVM bitcode. Nonetheless, the goals, methods, and results of this work will inform our own approach, in particular in the utility estimation aspect that balances FPF-determined novelty.

The single most relevant work by others, however, is to be found in a report on actual techniques in use at Google for applying mutation testing to real-world projects [79]. Their approach also uses a notion of feedback, but this is manually handled and based on using a classification scheme to heuristically throw out “arid” (likely not to be actionable) mutants; due to the size of Google’s code base and the integration of their approach in Google’s code review process, there is also a decision to only allow one mutation (initially randomly decided) per line of code. While the underlying motivation, of giving developers actionable information rather than computing a mutation score, is similar, and the idea of using some form of “feedback” is common, our approach targets the individual developing, testing, or verifying a particular software element (either a small project, or a component of a project), and assumes an iterative process, where developers consider one unkilld mutant at a time. The Google approach does not attempt to prioritize between the unkilld mutants it surfaces, or support custom mutation operators, or learn an individual testing effort’s characteristics. It is, instead, for obvious reasons, more an attempt to select mutants in an industrial scale code review setting than an effort to propose a new way to construct or enhance test suites; e.g., it only even proposes mutants of code in a diff with a previous version of the code, which makes it completely unusable in after-the-fact testing and verification efforts that do not have code changes. Further, it uses Google-wide coding conventions and developer suggestions to fix heuristics such as “avoid mutation of logging statements” rather than trying to learn (with human assistance) such heuristics for projects that may vary widely in language and coding style. We suspect that our ideas may be useful in generalizing or enhancing an effort such as Google’s, however, and share the focus on mutants as tools for focusing developer/tester attention and producing action on the part of humans, not computing a mutation score. Indeed, the report itself allows that the current approach does not scale, since it requires extensive manual support for each heuristic and language, a problem this proposal aims to directly address.

More broadly, a paper by the authors of the Google report and a group of academic mutation testing researchers [49], uses the Google effort to propose a notion of productive and unproductive mutants. Their concepts are highly related to our goals, but again centered on a diff-focused, large-scale industrial setting, rather than an approach that, like TDD, may also be applied to smaller coding efforts in a more isolated setting, such as development of embedded software, where crowdsourcing is impractical. Another key difference is that, while their work used EvoSuite to enhance a test suite to kill additional mutants, the assumption was that most suite enhancement would be due to developers adding manual tests. Furthermore, we doubt that any mutant is either “productive” or “unproductive” in an absolute sense, but rather the value of a mutant also depends on previous mutants a developer has manually examined, and the results of that examination, and we embody this in an FPF-centric workflow.

A second thrust of our efforts in this paper is to simplify the development, maintenance, and (especially) extension of mutation testing tools by using an extension of regular expressions to define mutation operators, and separating the generation of mutants from language or build-environment specific techniques for pruning invalid mutants. This aspect of the proposal primarily builds on our own initial work on the topic of regular-expression-based mutant generation [43] and Holzmann’s work on lightweight textual code analysis with Cobra [47]. Trivial compiler equivalence [77] is a key technology for supporting effective any-language mutation; especially in the context of this proposal, where executing all mutants is not the goal, simply letting the compiler handle many validity and equivalence questions is a simple and effective approach.

5 Broader Impacts

Improving Software System Reliability:

Education and Outreach: The proposed research yields several opportunities for enhancing CS education, recruiting new CS majors, and retaining CS students, particularly members of underrepresented groups. PI Groce will work with the NAU Student ACM Chapter to present a series of “excursions in testing” that introduce automated testing to students, using feedback-driven mutation testing and mutation-driven-testing

on real code, including code from media player libraries. The work of Guzdial [44] has shown that media computation is a potentially effective way to both recruit and retain female and under-represented minority students in computer science.

6 Results From Prior NSF Support

PI Groce has received support as PI or co-PI from three NSF grants. The most relevant and recent is “Diversity and Feedback in Random Testing for Systems Software” (CCF-1217824, \$491,280, 9/2012–9/2017), a collaborative proposal with John Regehr at the University of Utah. **Intellectual Merit:** The results of CCF-1217824 included a preliminary exploration of how to “tame” fuzzer output, a problem also central to this proposal [16]. In previous work, the goal was to find an algorithm for using hand-chosen distance metrics to identify bugs in tests; in this proposal, other methods for taming fuzzers are addressed. A key result from CCF-1217824 is the development of a strategy for creating “quick tests” [36], which won the Best Paper award at ICST 2014 for showing tests thus reduced can serve as effective regression tests or seeds for symbolic execution [41, 94]. Moreover, benefits do not depend on 100% preservation of a property [5]. Other results include an overview of the value of coverage in testing experiments [35] and exploration of how individual test features impact the coverage and fault detection statistics of random tests [34]. All of these results used mutation testing. **Broader Impacts:** CCF-1217824 has contributed to the discovery of previously unknown faults in multiple open-source and commercial software systems, including core compilers and system libraries. The development of the central swarm testing techniques has furthered many efforts to improve the quality of compilers, including LLVM and GCC, and to test core language tools in general [58, 55, 21, 59]. **Research Products:** Several publications resulted from this grant, including those cited above and numerous others [35, 16, 94, 36, 34, 4, 41, 46, 39, 5, 46, 30], along with three PhD theses. Source code [31, 40] is available on GitHub.

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