

# Argus : Debugging Performance Issues in Modern Applications with Interactive Causal Tracing

## Abstract

Prior systems use causal tracing, a powerful technique that traces low-level events and builds request graphs, to diagnose performance issues. However, they all assume that accurate causality can be inferred from low-level tracing with supported communication patterns or obtained from a developer’s schema upfront for all involved components. Unfortunately, based on our study and experience of building a causal tracing system on macOS, we show it is difficult, if not impossible, to get accurate request graphs. We present Argus, a practical system for debugging performance issues in modern desktop applications despite the inaccuracy of causal tracing. Argus lets a user inspect current diagnostics and provide domain knowledge on demand to counter the inherent inaccuracy of causal tracing. We evaluated Argus on 11 real-world, open spinning-cursor issues in popular macOS applications. The root causes of these issues were largely previously unknown. Our results show that Argus effectively helps us locate all root causes of the issues and incurs only 3.36% CPU overhead for its system-wide tracing.

## 1 Introduction

Today’s web and desktop applications are predominantly parallel or distributed, making performance issues in them extremely difficult to diagnose because the handling of an external request is often spread across many threads, processes, and asynchronous contexts instead of in one sequential execution segment [23]. To manually reconstruct a graph of execution segments for debugging, developers have to sift through massive amounts of log entries and potentially code of related application components [16, 26, 31, 33, 35]. More often than not, developers give up and resort to guessing the root cause, producing “fixes” that sometimes make the matter worse. For instance, a bug in the Chrome browser engine causing a spinning cursor in macOS when a user switches the input method [10], was first reported in 2012. Developers attempted to add timeouts to work around the issue. Unfortunately, the bug has remained open for seven years and the timeouts obscured diagnosis further.

Prior work proposed what we call *causal tracing*, a powerful technique to construct request graphs automatically [15, 21, 27, 28, 34]. It does so by inferring (1) the beginning and ending boundaries of the execution segments (vertices in the graph) involved in handling a request, and (2) the causality between the segments (edges)—how a segment causes others to do additional handling of the request. Compared to debuggers such as *spindump* that capture only the current

system state, causal tracing is effective at helping developers understand complex causal behaviors and pinpoint the root causes for real-world performance issues.

Prior causal tracing systems all assume certain programming idioms to automate inference. For instance, if a segment sends a message, signals a condition variable, or posts a task to a work queue, it wakes up additional execution segments. Prior systems assume that wake-ups reflect causality. Similarly, they assume that the execution segment, from the beginning of a callback invocation to the end, is entirely for handling related work in a request. Unfortunately, based on our study and experience of building a causal tracing system for macOS, we find that modern applications violate these assumptions. Hence, the request graphs computed by causal tracing are inaccurate in several ways.

First, an inferred segment can be larger than the actual event handling segment due to batch processing. Specifically, for performance, an application or its underlying frameworks may bundle together work on behalf of multiple requests with no clear distinguishing boundaries. For instance, WindowServer in macOS sends a reply for a previous request and receives a message for the current request using one system call *mach\_msg\_overwrite\_trap*, presumably to reduce user-kernel crossings. Second, the graphs can miss numerous causal edges. For instance, consider data dependencies in which the code sets a flag (e.g., “*need\_display = 1*” in macOS animation rendering) and later queries the flag to process a request further. This pattern is broader than ad hoc synchronization [30] because data dependency occurs even within a single thread (such as the buffer holding the reply in the preceding WindowServer example). Although the number of these flags may be small, they often express critical causality, and not tracing them would lead to many missing edges in the request graph. Third, inferred edges can be superfluous because wake-ups do not necessarily reflect causality. Consider an *unlock()* operation waking up an thread waiting in *lock()*. This wake-up can just be happenstance and the developer’s intent is mutual exclusion. However, the two operations can also enforce a causal order.

We believe that, without fully understanding of application semantics, request graphs computed by causal tracing are *inherently* inaccurate and both over- and under-approximate reality. Although developer annotations can help improve accuracy [21, 28], modern applications use more and more third-party libraries, whose source code is not available. Given the frequent use of custom synchronizations, work queues, and data flags in modern applications, it

is hopeless to count on manual annotations to ensure accurate capture of request graphs of the entire system.

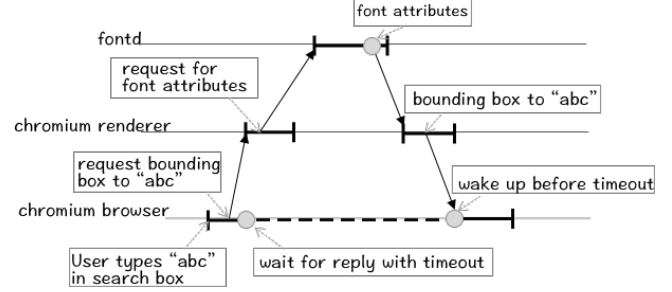
In this work, we present Argus, a dramatically different approach in the design space of causal tracing. As opposed to full manual schema upfront for all involved applications and daemons [14, 21, 28], Argus calculates an event graph for a duration of the system execution with both true causal edges and weak ones, and enables users to provide necessary schematic information on demand in diagnosis, as a debugger should rightly do. Specifically, Argus queries users a judiciously few times to (1) resolve a few inaccurate edges that represent false dependencies and (2) identify potential dependency due to data flags.

Argus targets two groups of users in mind: (1) technical users who wanted to compile informative bug reports for the applications crucial to them and (2) developers of the application or system who wanted to either pinpoint the issue in their component or identify which component is responsible so they can assign the issue to the corresponding developers. Today’s applications are often built on top of many third-party, closed-source libraries and frameworks such as Cocoa [1], and the operating system itself is often closed-source. Besides technical users, even developers of the application or system may not have access to the code of some critical components in the software stack. We thus explicitly built Argus to work in closed-source settings.

We implement Argus in macOS whose frameworks and applications are mostly closed-source. This closed-source environment therefore provides a true test of Argus. We address multiple nuances of macOS that complicate causal tracing, and build a system-wide, low-overhead, always-on tracer. Argus enables users to optionally increase the granularity of tracing (e.g., logging call stacks and instruction streams) by integrating with existing debuggers such as *lldb*.

We evaluate Argus on 11 real-world, open spinning-cursor issues in widely used applications such as Chromium browser engine and macOS System Preferences, Installer, and Notes. The root causes of all 11 issues were previously unknown to us and, to a large extent, the public. Our results show that Argus is effective: it helps us non-developers of the applications find all root causes of the issues, including the Chromium issue that remained open for seven years. Argus mostly needs only less than 3 user queries per issue but they are crucial in aiding diagnosis. Argus is also lightweight: its systems-wide tracing incurs only 3.36% CPU overhead overall.

This paper makes three main contributions: (1) our conceptual realization that causal tracing is inherently inaccurate, and our approach of interactive causal tracing that explores a novel point in the design space; (2) our system Argus that performs system-wide causal tracing with little overhead, embraces inaccuracy in the event graphs, and diagnoses issues using human-in-the-loop algorithms; and (3) our results



**Figure 1.** Handling User Typing in Chromium. The *browser* and *render* each split the work among a main thread and a worker thread. Front service daemon *fontd* uses thread pooling. For clarity, only processes are shown, not their threads.

using Argus to uncover the root causes of 11 real-world macOS spinning cursors, many of which have remained open for years.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces causal tracing and prior work. Section 3, presents an overview of Argus including its design choices, work flow, diagnosis algorithm, and limitations. Section 4 reports inherently inaccuracy patterns observed in macOS and Argus’s mitigation. Section 5 describes several implementation details of Argus. Section 6 explains our evaluation methodology and results. Section 7 summarizes related work. Section 8 concludes.

## 2 Background: Casual Tracing

Modern applications are often highly concurrent, spreading the handling of an external request in multiple threads, processes, and asynchronous contexts, each of which may multiplex on different requests. Causal tracing thus aims to reconnect the execution segments physically separated in different execution contexts but logically on behalf of the same request. Figure 1 shows an example in Chromium, an open-source browser engine that powers Google Chrome and, starting recently, Microsoft Edge [9]. When a user types a string in Chromium, the *browser* process sends an IPC message to the *render* process where the rendering view and WebKit code run, to calculate the bounding box of the string. *render* then queries *fontd*, the font service daemon, for font dimensions. Once *fontd* replies and wakes up *render*, *render* in turn wakes up *browser*. The handling of user typing is thus split among at least three processes and their relevant threads, and an ideal causal tracing tool would capture these segments (vertices) and their connections (edges) into a generalized control-flow graph to aid developer reasoning.

Compared to tools such as *spindump* that capture only the current system state such as the call stack snapshots of each thread, causal tracing captures the dependency path of events, enabling users to trace across threads and processes to past events. For instance, if *render*’s reply hangs *browser*,

causal tracing would enable a developer to examine *fontd*'s reply to *render*, whereas the *fontd* call stack that *spindump* captures at the time of the hang may be for a completely irrelevant request.

Mechanically, to build an event graph, causal tracing tools must infer the beginning and ending boundaries of execution segments and connect a segment with the other segments that it creates or wakes up. Lacking application semantics, existing tools make various assumptions to infer segment boundaries and connections. We select AppInsight and Panappticon, two tools closely related to Argus, and describe how they do so.

AppInsight is designed to help developers understand the performance bottlenecks in mobile applications. To infer execution segment boundaries, it interposes on the interface between the application and framework, and assumes that the application follows mostly the event callback programming idiom. The entry and exit of a callback invocation delimit an execution segment. If this segment installs additional callbacks or signals a waiting thread, then AppInsight connects the corresponding segments.

Panappticon detects performance issues in Android applications. It traces low-level events in the Android system and libraries. To infer execution segment boundaries and connections, it assumes two programming idioms: work queue and thread pooling. For work queue, it marks the handling of a work item as an execution segment, and connects this segment to the segment that dispatches the work item. For thread pooling, it marks from the wakeup of a worker thread to the wait as an execution segment, and connects this segment to the segment waking up the worker thread.

### 3 Overview

In this section, we describe the design choices in Argus's event graphs (§3.1), its work flow (§3.2), its diagnosis algorithm (§3.3), an example diagnosis session on a real Chromium spinning cursor (§3.4), and Argus's limitations (§3.5).

#### 3.1 Argus Event Graph

Compared to prior tools, Argus differs in three key design choices of its event graphs. First, since event graphs are inherently inaccurate, Argus embraces inaccuracies and mitigates them. For instance, instead of assuming a small fixed set of communication idioms, Argus is tracing general wake-up and wait operations inside the kernel to ensure coverage across diverse user-level custom synchronization primitives because their implementations almost always use kernel wake-up and wait. This approach necessarily includes spurious edges in the graph, including those due to mutual exclusion and context switch by interrupts. Argus filters some of these edges automatically such as those added due to interrupts because they do not reflect application intents. It applies several effective heuristics to further refine them

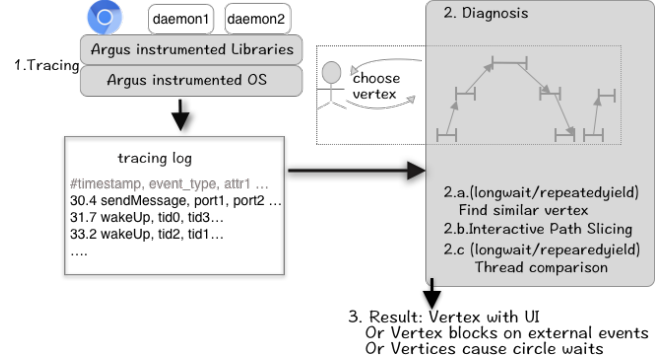


Figure 2. Argus Work Flow.

(see §4), and queries the user interactively when needed to resolve ambiguity.

Second, Argus differentiates strong and weak causal edges in its graph. When there is strong evidence of causality, such as callback dispatch, it adds strong edges. When it adds edges heuristically to mitigate inaccuracies (see §4), it marks them weak. Its diagnosis algorithm prefers strong over weak edges, and follows weak edges only when no strong edges present. In case of ambiguity, it queries the user for resolution.

Third, Argus stores extra information in the execution segments of the graphs. Most of this information is semantical, including system calls, call stacks when certain operations such as *mach\_msg* are running, and user actions such as key presses. These events enable Argus to find potential normal vs buggy executions for comparative diagnosis, and provide users more application semantics for interactive debugging. In addition, with users' help, Argus captures key data flag reads and writes which often entail crucial causality.

#### 3.2 Argus Work Flow

Argus operates in two stages as shown in Figure 2. In the first stage, its system-wide tracing tool collects events from Argus-instrumented libraries and kernel using a ring buffer and periodically flushes them to disk. Its overhead is small, so a user may run this tool continuously during normal usage of her computer and invoke Argus to diagnose when a performance issue occurs. Alternatively, she can run this tool reactively once she experiences an issue, and reproduces the issue to collect the events for diagnosis.

In the second stage, the user runs Argus to diagnose in a semi-automated manner. Argus's algorithm constructs an event graph from the traced events and traverses the graph to search for the root cause of the performance issue. Depending on its finding, it queries the user interactively to resolve ambiguity such as determining which edge Argus should follow when a vertex has multiple incoming edges. The result from this stage is either the root cause of the performance issue or that Argus needs more data such as user annotation of a data flag or call stacks for the system

calls that the application issues. Such fine-grained data is not captured by default to reduce tracing overhead. The user can always go back to the first stage to gather such data and diagnose again.

### 3.3 Diagnosis Algorithm

To initiate diagnosis, Argus needs a problem vertex in the event graph to begin with. While its algorithms and techniques apply to general performance issues, it currently targets spinning cursors – macOS displays them when the current application has not processed any UI events for over two seconds – because they are quite annoying to users, especially several of the authors. The problem vertex is the one in the application’s main thread, the designated UI-handling thread in macOS, concurrent to the spinning cursor.

Given the event graph and the spinning vertex, Argus runs Algorithm 1 to pinpoint the root cause. Specifically, upon examining what the main thread is actually doing, there are three potential cases.

- **LongRunning** (lines 3 - 5). The main thread is busy performing lengthy CPU operations. This case is the simplest, and Argus traverses the event graph backwards to find a slice originating from the offending UI event to the long running CPU operations. This slice is particularly useful for further diagnosing the bug. As shown in Function *InteractiveSlice*, when traversing the graph, Argus may encounter vertices with multiple incoming edges or weak edges that do not reflect causality. It queries the user to resolve them.
- **RepeatedYield** (lines 6 - 11). The main thread is in a yield loop, highly indicative that it is waiting on a data flag (e.g., “while(!done) thread\_switch();”). If Argus cannot find any record of data flags in the spinning vertex, it terminates debugging by prompting the user to identify data flags and re-trace the application. Here we assume that the performance issue reproduces with a reasonable probability because, fortunately, a one-off issue that never reproduces is not as annoying as one that occurs frequently. If Argus finds the data flag the spinning vertex is waiting for, it falls through to the next case.
- **LongWait** (lines 12 - 21). The main thread is in a lengthy blocking wait and the wake-up has been missing. Argus handles this case by finding a normal scenario where the wake-up indeed arrives, and then figures out which wake-up edge is missing in the spinning scenario along the expected wake-up path. Specifically, Argus first finds a similar vertex to the spinning one based on the sequence of events such as system calls in each vertex (more details at the end of this subsection). It then traverses backwards from the similar vertex to find the normal wake-up path. For each thread in the wake-up path, it examines the vertex

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#### Algorithm 1 Diagnosis algorithm.

---

**Input:**  $g$  - EventGraph;  $spinning\_vertex$ - the vertex in the UI thread when the spinning cursor occurs

**Output:**  $root\_cause\_vertices$ - vertices for user to inspect root cause

```

1: function DIAGNOSE( $g$ ,  $spinning\_vertex$ )
2:   switch  $spinning\_vertex.block\_type$  do
3:     case LongRunning
4:        $slice \leftarrow InteractiveSlice(spinning\_vertex)$ 
5:       return vertex contains UI event
6:     case RepeatedYield
7:       if  $DataFlagEvent \notin \{event\ types\ in\ spinning\_vertex\}$  then
8:         Require users to annotate data flag
9:         exit()
10:      end if
11:      /* Fall through */
12:     case LongWait
13:        $similar\_vertex \leftarrow FindSimilarVertex\ to\ spinning\_vertex$ 
14:        $normal\_path \leftarrow InteractiveSlice(similar\_vertex)$ 
15:       for each  $t \in \{threads\ in\ normal\_path\}$  do
16:          $vertex_t \leftarrow vertex\ in\ t\ before\ spinning\_vertex\ spins$ 
17:         if  $vertex_t \in \{LongRunning, RepeatedYield,$ 
LongWait $\}$  then
18:            $root\_cause\_vertices.append(vertex_t)$ 
19:            $root\_cause\_vertices.append(Diagnose(g, vertex_t))$ 
20:         end if // if t is normal running, disgnose the next thread
21:       end for
22:   end switch
23:   return  $root\_cause\_vertices$ 
24: end function

25: function INTERACTIVESLICE( $g$ ,  $vertex$ )
26:   loop
27:      $path\_slice.append(vertex)$ 
28:     if  $vertex$  has 1 strong incoming causal edge then
29:        $vertex \leftarrow predecessor\ vertex$ 
30:     else if  $vertex$  has multiple incoming edges then
31:        $vertex \leftarrow ask\ user\ to\ pick\ or\ stop$ 
32:     else if  $vertex$  has 1 weak incoming edge then
33:        $vertex \leftarrow ask\ user\ to\ pick\ or\ stop$ 
34:     end if
35:     if  $vertex$  has no incoming edges or user chooses to stop then
36:       return  $path\_slice$ 
37:     end if
38:   end loop
39: end function

```

---

in the thread right before the time that the spinning vertex waits. If this vertex is also problematic (e.g., another LongWait), Argus appends it to the path of root cause vertices, and applies Function *Diagnose* recursively to diagnose “the culprit of the culprit.” For each such vertex, it queries the user to determine whether to proceed or stop. Based on our experience, a few iterations suffice to pinpoint the root cause.

Our experiments show that the first case is the most common, but the second and third represent more severe bugs. Long-running CPU operations tend to be more straightforward to diagnose with existing tools such as *spindump* except they do not connect CPU operations back to daemons and UI





```

1 //worker thread in fontd:      1 //main thread in fontd:
2 //enqueue a block             2 //dequeue blocks
3 block = dispatch_mig_sevice;  3 block = dequeue();
4 dispatch_async(block);         4 dispatch_execute(block);

1 //implementation of dipatch_mig_server
2 dispatch_mig_server()
3 for(;;) //batch processing
4     mach_msg(send_reply, rcv_request)
5     call_back(rcv_request)
6     set_reply(send_reply)

```

**Figure 4.** Dispatch message batching.

may perturb timing, causing some timing-nondeterministic issues to disappear. However, performance issues tend to last a while for them to be problematic, and we have not experienced such nondeterminism in our evaluation.

To diagnose spinning cursors caused other than long running CPU operations, Argus requires a normal case to compare against. This requirement should generally be fine because if the application always causes a spinning cursor, the issue is most likely already caught during testing.

We implemented Argus in the closed-source macOS which presents a harsh test, but we have not ported Argus to other operating systems yet. It is possible that the techniques do not generalize to other operating systems. However, modern operating systems share many similarities, and inspire each others’ designs, so we are hopeful that the ideas are generally applicable.

## 4 Handling Inaccuracies in Causal Tracing

As explained in §2, causal tracing builds a graph to connect execution segments on behalf of a request that spread across separate threads and processes. Based on our experience building a causal tracing system on commercial closed-source macOS, we believe such graphs are inherently inaccurate and contain both *over-connections* which do not really map to causality, and *under-connections*, missing edges between two vertices with one causally influencing the other. In this section, we present several inherently inaccurate patterns (§4.1) and Argus’s mitigation methods (§4.2).

### 4.1 Inherent Inaccuracies

#### 4.1.1 Over Connections

Over connections usually occur when (1) intra-thread boundaries are missing due to unknown batch processing programming paradigms or (2) superfluous wake-ups that do not always imply causality.

**Dispatch message batching** While traditional causal tracing assumes the entire execution of a callback function is on behalf of one request, we found some daemons implement their service loop inside the callback function and create false dependencies. In the code snippet in Figure 4 from the

```

1 //inside a single thread
2 CGXPostReplyMessage(msg) {
3     // send _gOutMsg if it hasn't been sent
4     push_out_message(_gOutMsg)
5     _gOutMsg = msg
6     _gOutMessagePending = 1
7 }
8 CGXRunOneServicePass() {
9     if (_gOutMessagePending)
10        mach_msg_overwrite(MSG_SEND | MSG_RECV, _gOutMsg)
11    else
12        mach_msg(MSG_RECV)
13    ... // process received message
14 }

```

**Figure 5.** Batching in event processing.

```

1 //Worker thread:      1 //Main thread:
2 //needs to update UI: 2 //traverse all CA objects
3 obj->need_display = 1 3 if(obj->need_display == 1)
                        4     render(obj)

```

**Figure 6.** CoreAnimation shared flag.

```

1 //NSEvent thread:
2 CGEventCreateNextEvent() {
3     if (sCGEventIsMainThreadSpinning == 0x0)
4         if (sCGEventIsDispatchToMainThread == 0x1)
5             CFRRunLoopTimerCreateWithHandler{
6                 if (sCGEventIsDispatchToMainThread == 0x1)
7                     sCGEventIsMainThreadSpinning = 0x1
8                     CGSCConnectionSetSpinning(0x1);
9             }
10 }

1 //Main thread:
2 {
3     ... //pull events from event queue
4     Convert1CGEvent(0x1);
5     if (sCGEventIsMainThreadSpinning == 0x1){
6         CGSCConnectionSetSpinning(0x0);
7         sCGEventIsMainThreadSpinning = 0x0;
8         sCGEventIsDispatchedToMainThread = 0x0;
9     }
10 }

```

**Figure 7.** Spinning Cursor Shared Flags.

*fontd* daemon, function *dispatch\_client\_callout* is installed as a callback to a work from dispatch queue. It subsequently calls *dispatch\_mig\_server()* which runs the typical server loop and handles messages from different apps. Applications or daemons frequently use batching for performance, which necessarily intermingles handling of irrelevant events, making it fundamentally difficult to automatically infer event handling boundaries.

**Batching in event processing** Message activities inside a system call are assumed to be related traditionally. However, to presumably save on kernel boundary crossings, macOS

system daemon *WindowServer* uses a single system call to receive data and send data for an unrelated event from different processed in its event loop in Figure 5. This batch processing artificially makes many events appear dependent.

**Mutual exclusion** In a typical implementation of mutual exclusion, a thread’s unlock operation wakes up a thread waiting in lock. Such a wake-up may be, but is not always, intended as causality. However, without knowing the developer intent, any wake-up is typically treated as causality.

#### 4.1.2 Under Connections

We observe that under connections mostly result from missing data dependencies. This pattern is more general than shared-memory flags in ad hoc synchronization [30] because it occurs even within a single thread.

**Data dependency in event processing** The code in Figure 5 also illustrates a causal linkage caused by data dependency in one thread. *WindowServer* saves the reply message in variable `_gOutMsg` inside function `CGXPostReplyMessage`. When it calls `CGXRunOneServicePass`, it sends out `_gOutMsg` if there is any pending message.

**CoreAnimation shared flags** As shown in the code snippet Figure 6, worker thread can set a field `need_display` inside a *CoreAnimation* object whenever the object needs to be repainted. The main thread iterates over all animation objects and reads this flag, rendering any such object. This shared-memory communication creates a dependency between the main thread and the worker so accesses to these field flags need to be tracked.

**Spinning cursor shared flag** The very fact that spinning cursors are displayed involves data flags. Each application contains an *NSEvent* thread which fetches *CoreGraphics* events from the *WindowServer* daemon, converts them to *NSApp* events to dispatch to the application’s main thread, sets flag `sCGLEventIsDispatchToMainThread` as shown in Figure 7, and arms a timer to monitor the processing times of the main thread. If any *NSApp* event takes longer than two seconds to process, the main thread will not clear flag `sCGLEventIsDispatchToMainThread`. When the timer in *NSEvent* fires, it sets flag `sCGLEventIsMainThreadSpinning` and invokes *WindowServer* to display a spinning cursor. An interesting fact is that accesses to these shared-memory flags are controlled via a lock – the lock is used for mutual exclusion, and does not imply a happens before relationship.

## 4.2 Handling Inaccuracies

### 4.2.1 Mitigating Over-Connections

From a high-level, Argus deals with over-connections by heuristically splitting an execution segment that appears mixing handling of multiple requests.

Specifically, Argus splits based on three criteria. First, Argus recognizes a small set of well-known batch processing patterns such as `dispatch_mig_server()` (§4.1.1) and splits the batch into individual items. Second, when a wait operation such as `recv()` blocks, Argus splits the segment at the entry of the blocking wait. The rationale is that blocking wait is typically done as the last step in event processing. Third, if a segment communicates to too many peering processes, Argus splits the segment when the set of peers differs. Specifically, for each message, Argus maintains a set of two peers including (1) the direct sender or receiver of the message and (2) the beneficiary of the message (macOS allows a process to send or receive messages on behalf of a third process). Argus splits when two consecutive message operations have non-overlapping peer sets.

### 4.2.2 Mitigating Under-Connections

The heuristics in the preceding subsection splits execution segments to reduce over-connections, but they may occasionally remove true causal edges. Argus thus adds weak causal edges connecting the split segments to mitigate under-connection. When a weak edge is encountered during diagnosis, it queries users to decide whether to follow the weak edge or stop (§3).

The other primary under-connections are due to data dependencies. Currently Argus queries the user to identify the data flags. It is conceivable to leverage memory protection techniques to infer them automatically, as demonstrated in previous record-replay work [20, 25], which we leave it for future work.

To discover a data flag, the user re-runs the application with Argus to collect instruction traces of both the normal and spinning cases. These traces record operand values of each instruction, so comparing them reveals the address of the data flag that leads to their divergence. Once the user identifies the address of the data flag, Argus traces it using either binary instrumentation (e.g., the `need_display` flag in *CoreAnimation*; see §4.1.2), or its watchpoint tool (§5.3). Argus add a causal edge from a write to a data flag to its corresponding read.

## 5 Implementation

In this section, we discuss how Argus collects tracing events from both kernel and libraries.

### 5.1 Event Tracing

Current macOS supports a system-wide tracing infrastructure [2]. It by default stores events in memory and flushes them to screen or disk periodically. Argus extends this infrastructure with a file-backed ring buffer to support system-wide tests and avoid exhausting the disk. The file size is set to 2GB by default, approximately 19 million events (about

5 minutes of normal operations). The size can be adjusted by users to accommodate the desired trace history.

Default tracing points in macOS provide too limited information to enact causal tracing. We therefore instrument both the kernel [3] (at the source level) and key libraries (at the binary level) to gather adequate data. We instrument the kernel with 1,193 lines of code, and binary-instrument the following libraries: *libsystem\_kernel.dylib*, *libdispatch.dylib*, *libpthread.dylib*, *CoreFoundation*, *CoreGraphics*, *HIToolbox*, *AppKit* and *QuartzCore* in 57 different places.

## 5.2 Instrumentation

Most libraries and applications are closed-source in macOS. To hook their functions with techniques such as library preloading are not applicable for two reasons. First libraries use two-level executable namespace [4]. Applications access the original library with file name. Second Argus traces APIs in libraries which are referenced by other libraries. Hence, we implemented a binary instrumentation mechanism that allows users to add tracing points inside a binary image.

Like Detour [24], we statically scan instruction patterns to decide where the instrumentation performs and enact it at runtime. The user supplies a sequence of instructions for Argus to search the locations of interest in the image, and a trampoline function which overwrites the sequence of instructions and produces tracing data with API *kdebug\_trace* from Apple. Argus generates shell code with the trampoline function to replace the victimized instructions. All of the trampoline functions are grouped into a new image with an initialization function that triggers the drop-in replacement. Argus configures the image in the following steps to finish the instrumentation: (1) it re-exports all symbols from the original image, so the original code can be called like a shared library; (2) it renames the original image and applies original name to the new one to ensure the modifications are properly loaded; (3) it invokes the initialization function externally with *dispatch\_once* when the library loads.

## 5.3 Tracing Data Flags

As described in (§4), under-connection due to the missing data dependency requires users' interaction. Users specify that reads and writes to a given variable should be considered data dependencies. Data flag tracing is possible through Argus's binary rewriting, but we also provide a simple command line tool which uses watchpoint registers to record *data\_flag\_write* and *data\_flag\_read* events. The tool *Argus\_wp* takes as input the process ID, path to the relevant binary image, and the symbol name of the global variable.

```
\xxx_wp <pid> <binary image path> <symbol name>
```

It first gets symbol's offset in file from the image, and find its memory address in the process. Argus injects the watchpoint handler into *CoreFoundation* with our binary instrumentation mentioned above. *CoreFoundation* is a fundamental

framework for all GUI apps, so the watch pointer handler can be loaded into the memory space of the target process. The handler invokes Apple's API *kdebug\_trace* to record the value of the data flag and its operation type (read or write).

## 5.4 Tracing Instructions and Calls

Users may need to gather more information, such as individual instructions and call stacks, to come up with and verify a binary patch. Argus integrates with *lldb scripts* to capture this information and add it to the corresponding vertices in the event graph. Our *lldb scripts* gather call stacks at relevant locations and parameters tainted by user inputs. To reduce the data collection overhead, only at each beginning of a function call does the script record a full call stack. While *lldb* steps into functions from apps and frameworks to record parameters tainted, it steps over and only records the return value of APIs from low-level libraries (i.e. those with the filename extension *.dylib*).

The combination of instruction-level tracing and occasional call-stacks offers more than enough detail to diagnose even the most arcane issues, and in our experience has been very helpful in multiple steps of an Argus diagnosis.

## 6 Evaluation

In this section, we describe the methodology of case study, the root causes diagnosed with Argus for performance issues in macOS, and the overhead of Argus tracing system.

### 6.1 Methodology

Prior work relies on the request graph per transaction to identify bottlenecks and speculate about possible causes. One of them, Panappticon for Android, is closest to ours in design. Their traced events and causality are a subset of ours. We demonstrate the inherent inaccuracy of the request graph extracted with Panappticon's causal tracing, we therefore carry out the study in §6.2 with microbenchmarks. This section also evaluates the methodology of another tool, AppInsight.

In §6.3, we carry out real-world case studies with collected performance issues of popular applications, which likely represent the bugs attractive to tech-savvy users. Among the 26 bugs we examined from Github reports, most of them we are not able to reproduce due to our system version or insufficient report details. We thus decide to focus on 3 bugs which we successfully reproduced. 8 additional performance issues are collected from daily-used applications on the author's laptop. As a result, we study 11 reproducible cases. Next, we describe how we measure the heuristics Argus uses to mitigate graph inaccuracy, and manual effort required in the diagnosis. We first enable tracing component in our laptop and reproduce the 11 performance issues. The tracing data are collected to construct event graphs, which contain vertices with multiple incoming edges or weak edges. We run the Argus diagnosis algorithm, and count how many times



Microbenchmark	Panappticon	Argus
AppList (minimize a running app)	have 7 unrelated apps due missing boundaries of batching.	contain 59 vertices with multiple incoming edges.
AbSearch (search Contacts with first name Smith )	miss the searching element construction in handler for lack of tracing data flag.	contain 72 vertices with multiple incoming edges.
AnimatedSlider (move slider with percentage in textfield)	connect 5 unrelated apps for lack of boundaries on batching.	contain 9 vertices with multiple incoming edges.

**Table 1.** Inaccuracy of request graph for microbenchmarks.

we encounter those vertices. In the worst case that we make a wrong decision, before reaching the end of path slicing, Argus allows us to relocate the path to a nearby vertex.

## 6.2 Microbenchmark

In this section, we demonstrate the inaccuracy of the request graph extracted with prior causal tracing systems. We performed three microbenchmarks, listed in Table 1. In each microbenchmark, we turn on the appropriate causal tracing system, launch the application we are testing, e.g. *AppList*, and perform our specified GUI interaction. We then terminate the causal tracing system, and ask it to construct a request graph at the moment we clicked on a GUI element. We search for a path through the request graph from the GUI action to a display update, and ensure that the path matches the ground truth (obtained through manual investigation).

In the *AppList* case, we selected *Sequel Pro* from the list of running applications, and clicked the *Hide* button to minimize it. Within Argus’s graph, the ground truth sequence of interprocess communication exists: the sequence is *WindowServer* user events  $\rightarrow$  *appleeventsd*  $\rightarrow$  *launchserviced*  $\rightarrow$  *Sequel Pro*. The graph has 59 vertices include multiple incoming edges that a user might need to distinguish between. Panappticon’s graph is a strictly larger superset; it is much harder to find the ground truth path because spurious edges are included in far more than 59 vertices, as is information from unrelated processes. It contains 20 processes, at least 7 of which are unrelated. 4 of them are included because *WindowServer* batches event processing as shown in Figure 5; 3 of them are from kernel task’s batching in timer processing. In addition, 4 UI events (mouse click, mouse move, system defined, and mouse exit event) passed to *AppList* are present in the same graph because of batching in runloop blocks [5]. Panappticon cannot split the batched operations without tracking the flags mentioned earlier in Figure 6. A third causal tracing system, AppInsight, is capable of tracking the boundaries of event handlers; however, we did not run it because it only tracks events within one application, and would miss events in all daemons as well as in *Sequel Pro* itself.

Bug ID	Application	Bug description
1-Chromium	Chromium	Typing non-english in search box causes webpage freeze.
2-SystemPref	System Preferences	Disabling an online external monitor and rearranging windows causes System Preferences freeze.
3-SequelPro	Sequel Pro	Lost connection freezes the APP.
4-Installer	Installer	Moving cursor out of an authentication window causes freeze.
5-TexStudio	TeXStudio	Modification on bib file with vim causes its main window hang.
6-TextEdit	TextEdit	Copying text over 30M causes freeze.
7-MSWord	Microsoft Words	Copying a document over 400 pages causes hang.
8-Notes	Notes	Launching Notes where stores a long note before causes freeze.
9-SIText	SublimeText	Copying or pasting in a file
10-TextMate	TextMate	with large amount of context
11-CotEditor	CotEditor	causes freeze.

**Table 2.** Bug Descriptions. We assign each bug in Column Bug ID to ease discussion.

## 6.3 Case Studies

In this section, we demonstrate how Argus helps to diagnose 11 spinning-cursor cases in popular applications. Table 2 describes the operations we perform on each application that triggers a hang. We test each case with Argus, Panappticon, and AppInsight (analysis only, different platform), and show selected results in Table 3. Panappticon’s failures are because it does not recognize some programming paradigms, while AppInsight only traces a single process and misses interprocess communications.

In fact, Panappticon and AppInsight fail on all cases, while Argus succeeds, but requires a small amount of manual user interaction (since our diagnosis is not fully automatic). As shown in Table 4, at most 3 user queries suffices in most cases to find the root cause path accurately. Although complex applications like MicosoftWord and Chromium require more queries, 13 and 22 respectively, many of them result from repeated patterns. They can be easily identified by users.

Overall, in the case of simple text editing applications, Argus can identify the UI event that causes a spinning cursor by merely relying on a few heuristics. However, these heuristics may make the wrong decision in complicated cases, and misidentify the relationships between intra/inter-thread events. It is unlikely that there exists a single graph search method that works in all cases, e.g. when given the choice between multiple incoming edges, the most recent match is sometimes correct, but sometimes not. This is why our system relies on expert knowledge of users to reconstruct a developer’s intent and accurately diagnose performance issues.

Bug ID	Panappticon	Applnsight	Argus
2-SystemPref	✗(data flags)	✗(WindowServer)	✓(2 data flags)
3-SequelPro	✗(batching in kernel task)	✗(sshd)	✓(2 ME)*
4-Installer	✗(batching in worker thread)	✗(SecurityAgent, authd)	✓(1 WE, 1 ME)*
5-TexStudio	✗(appkit event, timer, batching in WindowServer)	✗(fseventd)	✓(3 ME)*

**Table 3.** Compare Effectiveness of Causal Tracing System. \*WE stands for user interaction on Weak Edges, \*ME stands for user interaction on Multi-incoming Edges in Argus.

Bug ID	user interactions	size of path with interaction	heuristics	heuristics over interaction
1-Chromium	13	32	303	9.47
2-SystemPref	1	2	30	15.00
3-SequelPro	2	5	264	52.80
4-Installer	2	6	36	6.00
5-TexStudio	3	6	44	7.33
6-TextEdit	3	21	21	1.00
7-MSWord	22	67	136	2.03
8-Notes	2	10	42	4.20
9-SIText	1	3	3	1.00
10-TextMate	0	3	3	1.00
11-CotEditor	1	4	6	1.50

**Table 4.** Path slicing for buggy cases. We noticed that Argus’s query on incoming edges can be answered with the most recent one, thus we automated the path slicing in Argus with the heuristics. The length of the path is usually much longer due to excessive traverses to daemons and kernel task.

### 6.3.1 Long Wait and Repeated Yield

In this section, we discuss the cases where the spinning vertex is blocking on wait event or yielding loop, corresponding to LongWait and RepeatedYield. These root causes are mostly can be verified by themselves, as they are manifested by comparing to normal scenarios.

**2-SystemPref** *System Preferences* provides a central location in macOS to customize system settings, e.g. additional monitors configuration. *DisableMonitor* [11] provides more functionality, enable/disable monitors online. We catch the spinning cursor when we disable an external monitor and rearrange windows in *Display* panel.

The log collected by Argus contains 2 cases: 1) a baseline scenario where the displays are rearranged with the enabled external monitor, and 2) a spinning scenario as we described above. The spinning vertex in the main thread is dominated by system calls, *mach\_msg* and *thread\_switch*, which falls into the category of Repeated Yield. We discovered data flags, “\_gCGWillReconfigureSeen” and “\_gCGDidReconfigureSeen”,

which signify the configuration status and break the thread-yield loop. Argus reveals that the main thread of *System Preferences*, in the baseline scenario, sets the flags after receiving specific datagrams from *WindowServer*. Conversely, the setting of “\_gCGDidReconfigureSeen” is missing in the spinning case, and the main thread thus repeatedly sent messages to *WindowServer* for datagram.

In conclusion, we discovered that the bug is inherent in the design of the *CoreGraphics* framework, and would have to be fixed by Apple. We also verified this diagnosis by creating a dynamic binary patch to fix the deadlock. The patched library makes *DisableMonitor* work correctly, while preserving correct behavior for other applications.

**3-SequelPro** *Sequel Pro* [6] is a fast, easy-to-use Mac database management application for *MySQL*. It allows user to connect to database with socket or ssh. We experienced the non-responsiveness of *Sequel Pro* when it lost network connection and tried reconnections.

The tracing log contains two cases: 1) a quick network connection during login, and 2) *Sequel Pro* lost connection for a while. Although Argus identified the spinning vertex and similar vertex with ease, the backward slicing from similar vertex encountered multiple incoming edges, including one from a kernel thread. The kernel thread processes tasks from different applications in a batch. Interaction in the path slicing is helpful to reduce the noise. With comparison to the causal path in normal case, Argus reveals the main thread is blocking on a kernel thread, which waits for a ssh thread. Thus we conclude the root cause is the main thread blocking for network IO.

**4-Installer** *Installer* [7] is an application that extracts and installs files out of .pkg packages in macOS. When *Installer* pops up a window for privileged permission during the installation of *jdk-7u80-macosx-x64*, moving the cursor out of the popup window triggers a spinning cursor.

Argus successfully records the baseline scenario with the following operations. We first type in password in the popup window and then click the back button to reproduce the spinning case by moving cursor. Examining the spinning vertex and its similar vertex, Argus reveals the main thread is waiting for *authd* which blocks on a semaphore. Further diagnosis on *authd* reveals the root cause is the *SecurityAgent*. It processes user input and wakes up *authd* in normal case, but fails to notify *authd* in spinning case. We would suggest an operation for *SecurityAgent* to inform *authd* when the user input box loses cursor, so that the main thread in *Installer* receives proper signal from *authd*.

### 6.3.2 Long Running

In this section, we discuss the cases where the spinning vertex is busy on the CPU. Most text editing apps fall into this bug category. We studied bugs on *TexStudio*, *TextEdit*,

Microsoft Word, SublimeText, TextMate and CotEditor, to reveal the root causes.

**5-TeXStudio** *TeXstudio* [8] is an integrated writing environment for creating LaTeX documents. We noticed a user reported spinning cursor on the modification of bibliography (bib) file. Although the issue was closed by the developer for insufficient information, we reproduced it with our bib file around 500 items in a *TeXStudio* tab. When we touch the file in other editors like vim, a spinning cursor appears in *TeXStudio*'s window.

Argus recognizes the spinning vertex belongs to the category of LongRunning. The causal path sliced from the spinning vertex by Argus reveals the long-running function is a callback from daemon *fseventd*, and the long processing segment is busy to *CalculateGrowingBlockSize*, even without modifications to the file. The advantage of Argus over other debugging tools is it narrows down the root cause with the inter-processes execution path.

**6-TextEdit** *TextEdit* is a simple word processing and text editing tool from Apple, which often hangs on editing large files. When Argus is used to diagnose this issue, the heuristics of choosing the most recent edge is powerful enough to get the causal path.

The event graph reveals a communication pattern where a kernel thread is woken from I/O by another kernel thread; the woken kernel thread processed a timer callback function armed by *TextEdit* and finally woke a *TextEdit* thread. In the pattern, the kernel thread has two incoming edges. One is from another kernel thread's IO completion, and the other is from *TextEdit*'s timer creation. It not hard to reveal the high level semantics. *TextEdit* arms a timer for IO work, and the kernel thread gets the notification for the completion of IO and processes the timer callback. The success of heuristics is not surprising because the most recent edge in the vertex reflects the purpose of the execution segment. Although the heuristics works for the kind of simple application, it is not general enough to succeed for all patterns.

**7-MSWord** *Microsoft Word* is a large and complex piece of software. Argus can analyze the event graph, but it identifies multiple possible root causes: the length of path interactively sliced from the spinning vertex is 67, while the slicing with heuristics of choosing the most recent edge generates a path of 136 vertices.

We compared the paths and find they diverge from the third vertex backward from spinning vertex. In the vertex, a *Microsoft Word* thread is woken by another *Microsoft Word* thread, and launches a service *NSServiceController-CopyServiceDictionary*. The woken thread sends a message to *launchd* to register the new service and waits for a reply message. With the most recent edge heuristics in automatic slicing, Argus chooses the reply from *launchd* as its predecessor. However, a user can more accurately identify that the execution segment is on behalf of another *Microsoft Word*

BUG-ID	costly API	UI
8-Notes	1)NSDetectScrollDevicesThe -nInvokeOnMainQueue	system defined event
9-SIText	1)px_copy_to_clipboard 2)___CFToUTF8Len	key c
10-TextMate	1)-[OakTextView paste:] 2)CFAttributedStringSet 3)TASCIIEncoder::Encode	key v
11-CotEditor	1)CFStorageGetValueAtIndex 2)-[NSBigMutableString characterAtIndex:]	key Return

**Table 5.** Root cause of spinning cursor in editing Apps.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
without Argus	5.98	6.23	6.18	6.05	6.28
with Argus	6.29	6.01	6.09	6.28	6.01
average overhead	0.13%				

**Table 6.** Score From iBench.

	kb/s	With Argus	Without Argus	overhead(%)
<b>bonnie++</b>	read char	21922	22149	1%
	read block	226931	244089	7%
	rewrite	246807	267491	8%
	write char	22924	22936	0%
	write block	4073361	4396387	7%
seq	file create	17391	17381	0%
	file delete	18089	19401	7%
random	create	17472	17887	2%
	delete	8849	9567	8%
<b>iozone</b>	initial write	1199453	1318572	9%
	rewrite	3663066	4059912	10%
	average	-	-	3.97%

**Table 7.** IO throughput with bonnie++ and iozone.

thread. We rely on user interaction in this case to find the true root cause, since Argus is likely identifies all possibilities without priority.

**Other Editing Apps** Select, copy, paste, delete, insert and save are common operations for text editing. However, these operations on a large context usually trigger spinning cursors. In Table 5, we list the root causes reported by Argus, including the most costly functions in the event handler, and the user input event (derived from path slicing).

## 6.4 Performance Evaluation

In this section we present the performance impact of the live deployment of Argus. We deployed Argus on a MacBookPro9,2, which has Intel Core i5-3210M CPU with 2 cores and 4 thread, 10GB DDR3 memory and a 1T SSD.

Argus has a very small space overhead with the configuration of its tracing tool. It uses the ring buffer with configured 2G by default to collect tracing events. The memory used to store events is fixed to 512M by Apple, which is pretty low with regards to the memory usage of modern applications. In the remaining of this section, we measure Argus's overhead overall with iBench scores, IO throughput degradation

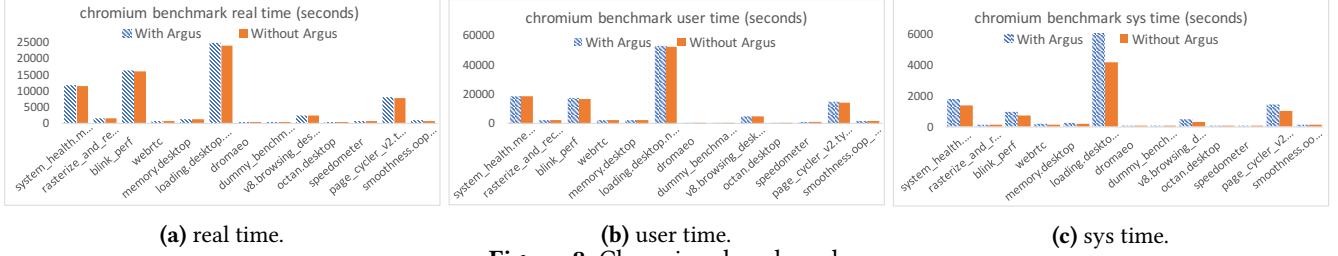


Figure 8. Chromium benchmark.

with bonnie++, iotzone and CPU overhead with chromium benchmarks.

**iBench** We first show the five runs of iBench with and without Argus to evaluate the overall performance. The machine is clean booted for each run, and the higher score means it performs better. As shown in Table 6, their performance are almost of no difference, only 0.13% degradation on average.

**IO Throughput** Next, we evaluate the IO throughput with bonnie++ and iotzone. As shown in the Table 7, the throughputs of sequential read and write by characters with and without Argus are almost same. Read and write by block impose less than 10% overhead in both microbenchmarks, bonnie++ and iotzone. With selected events in our system, the tracing tool integrated in Argus only adds 5% IO overhead on average.

**CPU** We evaluate Argus’s CPU overhead with chromium benchmarks by recording their time usage on real, user and sys. Although the overhead on sys is relatively higher than other two, due to the tracing events usually crossing the kernel boundary, they are not triggered too frequently in our daily software usage, including browsers. The time cost is mostly under 5%, except the *dummy\_benchmark.histogram*. As shown in Figure 8, the time overhead for real, user and sys are 3.36%, 2.15% and 36.76% respectively.

## 7 Related Work

While there is currently no system that can help users debug performance issues in closed-source applications on proprietary macOS, several active research topics are closely related.

Paradigm	Panappticon	AppInsight	Argus
Async calls	MessageQueue, ThreadPoolExecutor	Uppcall	libdispatch runloop timer
IPC calls	✓	✗	✓
Batching	✗	✗	✓
Data flag	✗	✗	✓
Wait-Wakeup	4 primitives	Silverlight methods	system wide

Table 8. Programming paradigms tracked.

**Event tracing.** Panappticon [34] monitors a mobile system and uses the trace to characterize the user transactions of

mobile apps. Although it aims to track system-wide events and correlate them without developer input, it supports only two models of communication: work queue and thread pooling. AppInsight [27] instruments application to identify the critical execution path in a user transaction. It supports the event callback pattern, and does not trace across process or app boundaries. Magpie [14] monitors server applications in Windows with the goal to model the normal behaviors of a server application in response to a workload. This model further helps detecting anomalies statistically. Magpie requires a manual-written event schema for all involved applications to capture precise request graphs, whereas Argus has a simple, application-agnostic schema for system-wide tracing and enables users to provide more application-specific knowledge on demand.

Aguilela [12] uses timing analysis to correlate messages to recover their input-output relations while treating the application as a black box. XTrace, Pinpoint and etc [16, 17, 21] trace the path of a request through a system using a unique identifier attached to each request and stitch traces together with the identifier. Argus comes up violation patterns and does not assume the presence of a unified identifier in closed-source, third-party applications, frameworks, and libraries.

**Performance anomaly detection.** Several systems detect performance anomalies automatically. [22, 33] leverage the user logs and call stacks to identify the performance anomaly. [18, 19, 29, 31] apply the machine learning method to identify the unusual event sequence as an anomaly. [32] generates the wait and waken graph from sampled call stacks to study a case of performance anomaly.

These systems are orthogonal to Argus as Argus’s goal is to diagnose an already-detected performance anomaly. These systems can help Argus by detecting more accurately when a performance issue arises.

## 8 Conclusion

Our key insight in this paper is that causal tracing is inherently inaccurate. Despite this limitation, all prior works attempt to perform fully automatic analyses. We built Argus, a practical system for full-system tracing and which can effectively diagnose performance issues, despite the inherent inaccuracy of causal tracing. It lets a user provide domain knowledge on demand to mitigate the inaccuracy.



Our results show that Argus effectively helped us locate root causes of many issues, including a bug in Chromium that has been unaddressed for more than seven years.

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