Week 2: Empirical Analysis of F-Droid

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# Empirical Analysis of F-Droid

F-Droid is a self-described installable catalog of FOSS (Free and Open Source) apps for the Android platform (F-Droid, 2021). There are roughly four thousand applications within their collection. Each project’s entry contains downloadable links to source repositories and official milestone releases. Numerous researchers are leveraging this information to publish papers on trends across the mobile community.

While these efforts shine light into the problem space, they are not complete. However, F-Droid represents 0.1% of the size of Google Play Store’s three million apps (Statista, 2021). Comprehensively analyzing this fraction generates enormous data volumes, requiring significant processing power, which introduces an additional sampling layer. Further, Google Play Store is the defacto solution for mainstream professional development, and excluding this population entirely creates a selection bias. Mechanisms need to exist for identifying and bridging these empirical gaps.

# Literature Review

Krutz et al. (2015) collected and analyzed metadata about 4416 versions of 1179 F-Droid projects. They used a series of static analysis tools (see Table 1) to populate an SQLite database. Academic lesson plans continue to incorporate these results, but they are not actively maintained.

Table 1: Static Analysis Tooling

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| --- | --- |
| Tool | Description |
| Stowaway | Static analysis tool for finding under/over permissions |
| Androrisk | Androguard reverse engineering tool. Calculates risk indicators of an app |
| Sonar | Source code analyzer covering seven axes of code quality (architecture and design, comments, coding rules, potential bugs, complexity, unit tests, and duplications) |
| FindBugs | Static analysis tool for finding Java issues |
| Checkstyle | Java source analysis tool |
| PMD | Identifies maintainability risks within a codebase |
| Git | Software versioning solution with revision log |

## Identifying Research Questions

The dataset contains several data points regarding permission misuse, code quality, and the breadth of contributors. There is sufficient data to examine:

1. Does a correlation exist between app categories and permission misuse
2. Does a correlation exist between security and code quality
3. Does a correlation exist between commit counts and permission misuse

## Extending the Database

The data set follows a normalized schema to reduce the physical file size and promote consistency. This analysis adds several SQL views for ease of exploration (see Table 2).

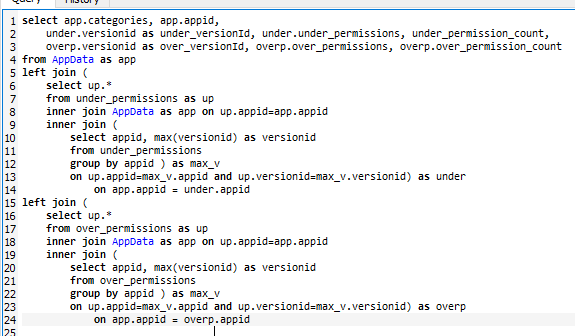
Table 2: Custom SQL Views

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| View Name | Description | Joins |
| over\_permissions | Unused permissions detected by Stowaway | Version, Permission, and OverPermission |
| under\_permissions | Missing permissions detected by Stowaway | Version, Permission, and UnderPermission |
| code\_risks | Combines Sonar code metrics and Androrisk score | Version, Vulnerability, and CodingStandard |
| app\_committers | App-level aggregate counts of committers | AppData and GitHistory |
| result\_set | Denormalizes per version data points into wide rows | AppData, Version,  code\_risks, app\_committers, over and under permission |

## R1: Category and Permission Misuse

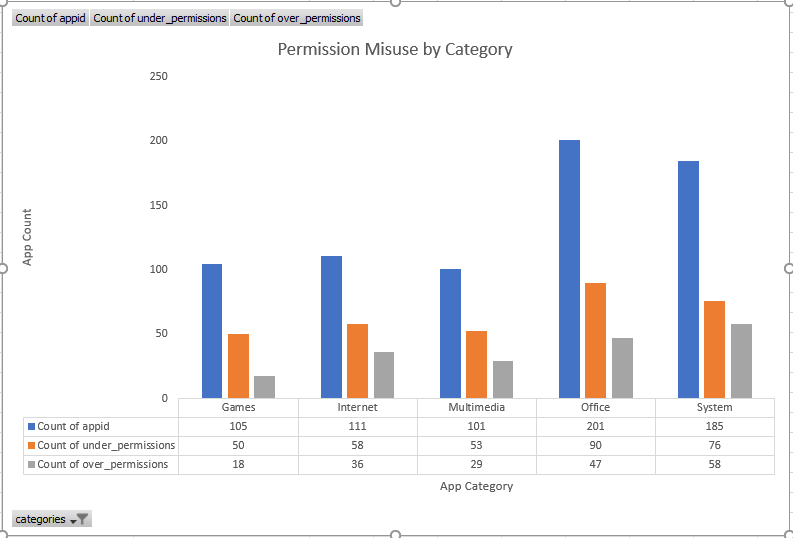
The first research question attempts to find a correlation between app categories and permission misuse. Stowaway analyzed 1621 versions of 853 sampled apps with static analysis of the Android Packages (APK) files. Since Stowaway is no longer maintained, it would be challenging to examine the remaining 63% of versions retroactively (Chromium, 2021). Instead, answers to this question only consider the most recent per-app scan result. Next, a filter retains only Games, Internet, Office, Multimedia, and System categories (835 of 853 entries). After removing erroneous and single-valued clusters, the data preparation is complete (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Categorical Permission Misuses



Using a pivot chart suggests that most nearly between 41 to 52% of apps miss at least one required permission. Meanwhile, between 17 to 32% have too many permissions. Internet and Systems are the worst offenders due to frequently missing contacts, wake lock, and audio rights. These same categories are overprivileged with wifi, internet, and storage access.

Figure 2: Permission Misuse by Category



## R1.5: Can we make that conclusion

However, these are meaningless statistics because not all Android permissions are created equal. In 2017, Google restructured the permission system to consist of standard and dangerous rights (Android, 2021). Dangerous permissions can compromise the user’s privacy and security expectations. Meanwhile, when an application is over permissive with non-dangerous rights, it creates technical debt, not an increased attack surface. This Android-specific behavior raises a new question, “what app categories are misusing dangerous permissions?”

Filtering the OverPermission table to the most recent Stowaway results returns 422 violations. After comparing these permissions against Android’s official list determines that 63 issues exist across 52 apps. From an initial glance, the System category appears to have the most issues. In reality, nearly all vulnerable apps only have one additional permission (mean=0.6), which artificially inflates the most categories.

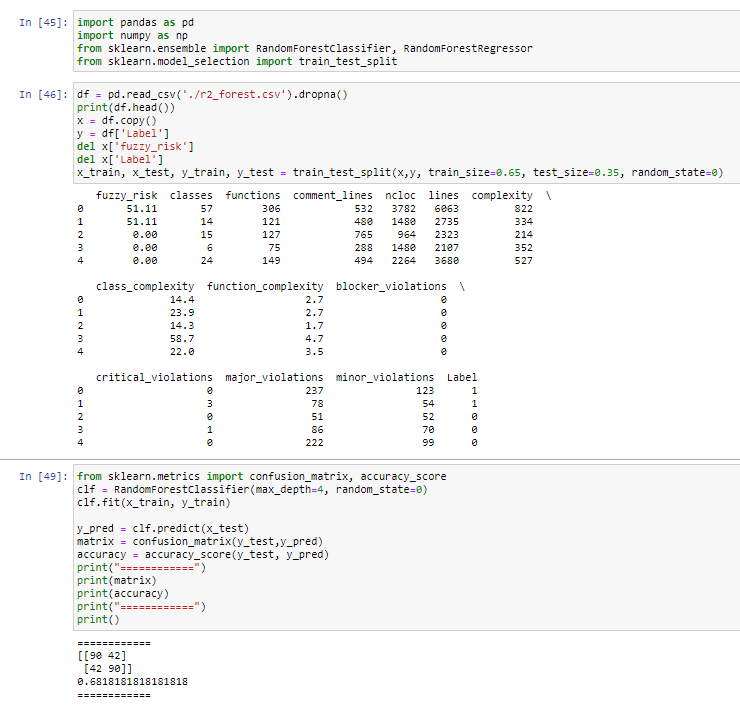
Figure 3: Finding Dangerous Permissions

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## R2: Security and Quality Metrics

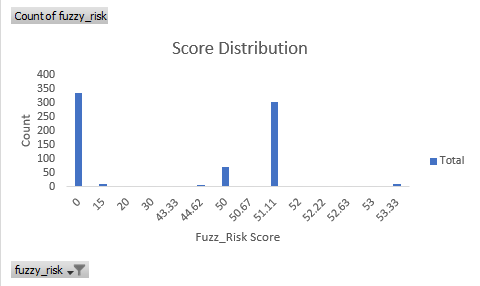
The second research question seeks a correlation between the Androrisk and Sonar results. Alenezi & Almomani (2018) address a similar problem using a random forest classifier. That work first collects twenty-one code metrics such as class complexity, duplicate blocks, and total lines of code. They combine these features with the Androrisk security score to empirically show that poorly documented complex code contains more security issues.

Figure 3: Training the Random Forest



Analogously, exporting the code\_risks view into Comma Separated Value (CSV) file allows Sci-Kit Learn to process the data. This process began with removing identifier columns and scoping the dataset to twelve code metrics for 753 apps. A binary classifier is ideal for the score distribution (label = score > 30)(see Figure 4). Next, training a random forest binary classifier used 65% of the records. The trained model is 68% accurate with 90% precision and recall metrics (see Figure 3). While there is room for improvement, these initial results suggest it is possible to predict Androrisk scores from code complexity. This characteristic infers that a correlation between the two systems must exist.

Figure 4: Fuzz Score Distribution



## R3: Breadth of Committers and Permission Misuse

The third research question seeks to identify a correlation between the number of committers and the likelihood of permission misuse. An experiment began with exporting a CSV file containing the appId, team size, number of commits, and total excessive permissions (see Figure 5). The correlation was not detected using several linear regression algorithms (e.g., SGD, Poisson, and Perceptron). Perceptron has the best performance (50% accuracy) but does not beat a lucky coin.

After the qualitative methods failed, a qualitative exploration took place. There appear to be multiple distinct use-cases spanning everything from solo teams, aggressive committers, and aggregate build accounts. Future research could collect more data and cluster the developer’s type. Then the research question needs can ask which types of accounts introduce the most significant security risk.

Figure 5: Linear Regression Model

# Conclusions

There was sufficient information within the database to answer the three original questions.

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| Question | Answer |
| R1: Does a correlation exist between app category and misused permissions | Yes, there is a slight skew in the data toward Internet and System categories. |
|  |  |

Krutz et al. (2015) built a useful data set for academic lesson plans. Unfortunately, it is becoming “bit-rotten” and failing to keep pace with Android development. These cracks are evident with the legacy permission metadata, deprecated tools, insufficient training data, and missing code metrics. Future research into this topic needs to consider more recent project permutations, such as Github Archive. There is also value automating the creation of this database from those various third-party sources.

# References

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