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Masterarbeit
Design and Implementation of a tool for
automatic,non-trivial code guideline
checking

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Ich versichere, dass ich diese Master-Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und nur die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel verwendet habe.

Heidelberg, dd.mm.yyyy

Zusammenfassung

Abstract auf Deutsch

Abstract

This is the abstract.

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1 Introduction

This chapter contains an overview of the topic as well as the goals and contributions of your work. Description of the domain Description of the problem Summary of the approach Outline of own contributions and results

1.1 Motivation

1.2 Goals

1.3 Structure

Here you describe the structure of the thesis. For example:

In Kapitel 2 werden grundlegende Methoden für diese Arbeit vorgestellt.

2 Background and Related Work

General description of the relevant methods/techniques

What has been done so far to address the problem (closer related work)

Possible weaknesses of the existing approaches

2.1 Code Quality

Code Quality describes the quality of source code with regard to understandability and readability. Developers can understand well-written code easily. High-quality code has an impact on onboarding new developers, writing new code and maintaining the existing code.

The onboarding of new developers is an investment of time and money in the developer. The faster a new developer can understand an existing code base, the faster the developer can start writing productive code and providing value.

Maintaining existing code and adding features is part of most software today (TODO source). Agile development is a methodology used in software development that reflects this requirement. Source Code is improved and changed with runnable software versions at the end of each iteration. From a business standpoint, the always-changing code is modeled by subscription-based contracts that include new features and bugfixes. The easiness to change source code is business-critical, and a high-quality code can affect this requirement in the following kinds [3]:

1. Well-written code makes it easy to determine the location and the way source code has to be changed.
2. A developer can implement changes more efficient in good code.
3. Easy to understand code can prevent unexpected side-effects and bugs when applying a change.
4. Changes can be validated easier.

The International Organization for Standardization provides the standard ISO/IEC 25000:2014 for “Systems and software Quality Requirements and Evaluation (SQuaRE)”[7].

Code Quality is measured by the following code characteristics:

1. Reliability
2. Performance efficiency
3. Security
4. Maintainability

Besides the mentioned maintainability characteristics, Code Quality also depends on reliability (like multi-threading and resource allocation handling), performance efficiency for efficient code execution, and security (like vulnerabilities to frequent attacks like SQL-injection).

2.2 Clean Code

Clean Code is a concept for high-quality code, coined by the book Clean Code by Robert C. Martin [6]. The root cause for unclean code is chaotic code. Developers produce chaotic code in a conflict between deadline pressure based on the visible output (the functionality of the software) and extra effort to make code more intuitive. The latter is not directly visible as productive output, although an accumulation of chaotic code reduces the productivity over time [6]. A bigger legacy system with chaotic code will slow down later modifications or additions of code. By following the Clean Code guidelines and best-practices, this productivity loss can be minimized.

The Clean Code techniques focus mainly on maintainability by providing intuitive code. This has a positive effect on the security and reliability aspect as well, since developers can find edge cases in non-logical behaviour more easily in intuitive code. Some of the following Clean Code principles may decrease performance efficiency. Still, in many software projects, developer performance is a more valuable resource than actual runtime performance (TODO source).

The following sections explain the clean code guidelines following the book by Robert C. Martin [6]. Since these rules are based on experience of the author, they are controversial. The critique will be explained in section TODO.

2.2.1 General Rules

Developers should follow the general rules consistently for developing new features or fixing bugs. They are the essential building blocks for the understandability and reliability of the code.

Follow standard conventions is the first rule. Programming languages have conventions on formatting, naming, etc (e.g. python¹). If developers follow these conventions, the code feels more familiar for other developers using the same conventions. It is also common practice for big open-source projects to have their own contributing guidelines with coding conventions. The Visual Studio Code GitHub repository contains a "How to contribute" documentation and a section on coding guidelines². Especially in such large open-source projects, many developers are working asynchronously on code. Therefore, having conventions and enforcing the compliance of the guidelines by rejecting pull requests prevents the code from becoming a mosaic of different coding styles.

The rule keep it simple is a summary of most rules in clean code. Simplicity in code makes it simpler and faster to understand for developers. A simpler software architecture enables a developer to modify code and checking all dependencies for potential side effects. Unnecessary complexity increases the time to understand and modify code and introduces bugs by having complex, non-obvious behaviors.

Everytime a developer touches the code, he should also improve the quality of the code or at least not worsen it. By doing a small fix and postponing the clean code principles, the code will become more chaotic until it is refactored. As a result, every change should keep at least keep the code level quality if not improving it.

2.2.2 Naming

It is important for understandable code to have good namings for variables, functions, types and classes. "Good" naming is an opinionated topic; The author describes the key components to good naming as follows: Names should be descriptive for the object. Abbreviations or mathematical annotations like *a1*, *a2* are not descriptive and do not provide information about the meaning. Implementations of mathematical expressions intentionally use the same terms as the expression itself. Since this increases the understandability for developers familiar with the mathematical expression, this can be seen as a valid exception. Descriptive names should include a verb or verb expression for

¹<https://www.python.org/dev/peps/pep-0008/>

²<https://github.com/Microsoft/vscode/wiki/Coding-Guidelines>

functions, since functions express an action. Conversely, class names should contain a noun to emphasize the object character of a class.

If the descriptive names are pronounceable too, it is easier to read and it is easier to talk about the code with other developers. Therefore, it is useful to make name longer but descriptive and pronounceable, especially since the autocomplete feature of IDEs will free the developer from typing the long name. Additionally, searching for long names works better than for short names, since long names are more likely to be unambiguous compared to shorter names. Short variables in a small scope (e.g. variable *i* in a loop) are not problematic, but using *i* in a large scope could be ambiguous and troublesome for searching.

An old naming convention is the Hungarian naming convention. In Hungarian naming, the type is encoded as a prefix of a variable name. Nowadays, this is seen as mostly redundant, since IDEs can infer and show the type automatically. The automatic type inference also prevents confusion for the reader if the type in the notation and the actual type are inconsistent. The same logic applies to a prefix for member variables and methods, since a IDE can automatically highlight those tokens.

2.2.3 Functions

Functions should be small in length. Exceeding 20 lines should not be necessary in most cases. If a function is small, it can be read more easily and without scrolling. Inside a function, if-, else- and while-statements should contain a function call for the condition and one function call for the body. By following the naming schemas in section 2.2.2, the function calls document the meaning of the condition in an intuitive way without the need for additional comments. Consequently, function calls replaces nested structures in a more readable way.

A general guideline for functions is to fulfill one purpose. This is a rather impractical view, since functions may have to call several functions subsequently to perform the required computation. Therefore, Robert C. Martin specifies that to one abstraction level per function. A low abstraction level handles data access and manipulation, e.g. string manipulation. On a middle abstraction layer, these low-level operations are orchestrated. On the next higher level, the mid-level functions are arranged etc. Switch-Statements violate the one purpose rule and is prone to be duplicated in several other code locations. Since they are a sometimes necessary construct, placing switch-statements into an Abstract Factory and creating different Subclasses for the different behaviours, the switch-statement can be replaced by polymorphism.

The number of function arguments should be three or lower. With many function arguments, it becomes harder to use the function. Additionally, testing becomes harder with more arguments; especially if all argument combinations should be tested. Functions with none or one argument simplifies testing alot. Since testing reduces the number of bugs, testable code is crucial. More arguments should be bundles in a config object or class, so many arguments are passed as one. Furthermore, using config objects enables grouping of arguments for the same context. A special focus lies on "output arguments"; these get passed as reference and are mutated in the function. Output arguments are common in low-level languages like C, but they require additional attention by the reader. Functions are expected to use the input values and return the output as a return value. Consequently, if a developer fails to notice an output argument, he may does not expect it to be mutated by the function and could face a logical error. Using function arguments as immutable is the most intuitive way. Although it is sometime necessary to mutate the input arguments in a function for performance reasons (TODO source).

A particular bad practice in the function body are side-effects. Side-effects happens, if a function modifies a variable outside its scope without explicitly mentioning this in the name. This leads to dependencies between the functions that are not obvious. A developer who uses the function checks the signature (meaning the name, input arguments and return type) and expects the function to do what the name suggests. If the function has a side effect, it is an unintended behaviour and will lead to mistakes that are time-consuming to debug. Especially side-effects that initialize other objects result in a time-dependency that is hard to identify and could be overseen at all.

Following the one purpose per function guideline, a function should either perform an action or retrieve information. Especially actions that return a value are unintuitive, since it is not clear if the return value encodes the success state or indicate something else. Furthermore, returning error codes violates this rule and errors should be indicated by raising an exception, if the language supports it. This allows a better separation between application logic and error handling code. The code for catching and handling an exception may be separated into an additional function, to provide a clean structure for higher level functions. In this case, error handling counts the one purpose of this function. A general, important principle for software engineering applies directly to functions: Don't repeat yourself. Repeated Code is dangerous and chaotic, since it requires changes in multiple locations if it has to be modified. This makes duplicated code very prone to copy and paste errors and small mistakes that may not be obvious

during development but will lead to a fatal crash at runtime. Many patterns and tools have been developed to mitigate duplicated code (TODO: some references to duplicated code detection etc).

2.2.4 Comments

Comments are part of every programming language and can play an important role in code quality. Good comments clarify the meaning of the code and help to understand the code. However, comments can become outdated and wrong or provide useless information. In a perfect world, the programming language and the programmer would be expressive enough that commenting is not required for clarity. Following the clean code guidelines for naming and functions makes many descriptive comments obsolete, since the function description is encoded in the function name.

Comments will not help to turn chaotic code into clean code. If a developer explains a line of code by a comment, it is often more helpful to call a function with a descriptive name to replace the comment. Since comments are not part of the program logic, if the explaining comment is not updated with the code, the comment gives misinformation to the reader like described before.

In brief, before writing a comment, the developer should think about expressing the same in code. Robert C. Martin gives some exceptions for good comments [6]:

Legal notes: Legal notes like copyright or license information and author mentions may be necessary. Although they should be short in link to an external licensing document in full extent.

Explaining comments: Some explaining comments can be helpful and are not easy to encode in normal code. For instance an explanation of special encodings or file formats are better to understand.

Intention: Explaining an intention in a comment that is not obvious by the source code is also a valid use for a comment and can help to understand code that otherwise would not make any sense.

Warning for consequences: Some parts of the code can have special consequences like not being thread safe or using many system resources. A warning can help a developer from using a function and having trouble.

Emphasize: A comment to emphasize a seemingly unimportant part of the code prevents breaking modifications of the code.

2.2.5 Data Structures and Objects

Data Structures and Objects can be easily mixed together, but their purpose is converse. Objects hide data behind abstractions and has functions that work with these data. Conversely, data structures expose the data and do not provide functionality. Based on this definition, the Law of Demeter (TODO source) is defined: Objects should know as little as possible about the implementation of objects it manipulates. As a result, code becomes decoupled, since objects do not depend on specific data structures of other objects. In object-oriented programming, a method *m* of an object *O* may only call methods of the following components:

- the object *O* itself
- the parameters of the method
- objects that are created within *m*'s scope
- instance variables of *O*

The method should not call methods of objects, that are returned from the allowed objects. If a method calls specific functions of these objects, it assumes this behaviour. As a result, the two objects are closely coupled. Such bad code practice is called train wreck, since subsequent method calls look like multiple train carriages. A split in multiple variables and method calls improves the Train Wreck. Nevertheless, method calls on objects assume knowledge of the internal implementation of the objects and would violate the Law of Demeter. However, if the methods are accessor functions, it would not violate the law, since the method calls are just an access to the data structure. Instead of calling a method of an object and calling a method on the returning object, the first called object could provide a function that takes care of calling the other object. This reduces the coupling between the three objects and would preserve the Law of Demeter in all objects.

Data structures are often used as Data Transfer Object (DTO) to communicate with other processes or services. These objects do not contain any functions, they only have accessible member variable. A specialisation of DTOs are Active Records, that contain additional methods for data storage, since they are used to represent a data source like a database. For both types, it is bad practice to insert business logic into these objects, since they should be treated as data structures. This creates a hybrid between an object and a data structure that should be avoided.

2.2.6 Exception Handling

Section 2.2.3 briefly mentioned a clean code guideline for exception handling. Exceptions should be handled by raising and catching exceptions instead of error codes or flags. Error code handling introduces code, that is not coherent with main logic. Error codes have to be checked immediately and error handling has to be implemented directly. As a result, the two concerns main logic and error logic are mixed. By raising and catching errors, the error handling can be completely extracted into a separate function and can be removed from the main logic. Furthermore, the try-catch block enforces a transactional behaviour. At the end of either the try or the catch block, the application should be in a consistent state. Error codes hide this explicit transactional behaviour. Notwithstanding, Go as a more recent programming language³ returns an explicit error types instead of raising an exception. This was designed to “encourage you to explicitly check for errors where they occur”, instead of “throwing exceptions and sometimes catching them”[4]. Exceptions should contain enough context to find the cause and the source of the error. Exception classes accomplish the grouping of cause source of the error.

In case of error handling with a third-party library, the library called should be wrapped and multiple, possible exception types should be grouped into a unified library exception type. The wrapping reduces the coupling to the third-party dependency. If the library changes (e.g. changing the signature and adding another exception type), only one location has to be adapted to comply to the changed library interface. Additionally, changing to another library is simple and tests can mock the third-party library. For exception handling, wrapping unifies the exception from the library that is clearly distinct from own exceptions.

Another form of exception handling is returning null. Instead of checking for an error code, the caller method checks for a null return value. As easy it is to miss an error code, as easy it is to miss a null checking. Consequently, the program will terminate with an unhandled `NullPointerException` at runtime. Tony Hoare introduced the null reference in 1965 and later called it his “billion-dollar mistake”[5], since it led to many bugs and security vulnerabilities throughout the decades. Languages like Kotlin are designed with Null Safety enforced. Kotlin distinguishes between nullable and non-nullable references, with a compiler enforcing null checking[2]. If a language does not enforce null safety with a compiler, a special case like an empty collection or an optional type can be returned. Passing null to a function as a parameter is also dangerous, since a function

³designed in 2007 as a response to problems with C++, Java and Python[1]

would explicitly assert for non-null parameter values. Since this is not a clean way, null parameters should not be used.

2.3 Quantitative Metrics for Code Quality

Kritik an Clean Code

- ??Teaching clean code, the paper from one german university

- Tools review for all tools that check different stuff

- Single Responsible principle, Open-Closed principle

3 Approach

Approach(es) without the quantitative results (or only selected results to motivate the choices/the problems)

- What has possibly failed (short)

- What has worked and why

- What could be possible method extensions/improvements

4 Quantitative Evaluation

Research questions Description of the evaluation environment/setup Results/answers per research question Optional comparison to prior work Discussion and analysis of strengths/problems Note: see

5 Conclusion

An overall short summary of results What was successful, what not (and hypotheses why) Hints for further future work/extension

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