# Performance Regression Testing Target Prioritization via Performance Risk Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

As software evolves, problematic changes can significantly degrade software performance, i.e., introducing performance regression. Performance regression testing is an effective way to reveal such issues in early stages. Yet because of its high overhead, this activity is usually performed infrequently. Consequently, when performance regression issue is spotted at a certain point, multiple commits might have been merged since last testing. Developers have to spend extra time and efforts narrowing down which commit caused the problem. Existing efforts try to improve performance regression testing efficiency through test case reduction or prioritization.

In this paper, we propose a new lightweight and white-box approach, performance risk analysis (*PRA*), to improve performance regression testing efficiency via testing *target* prioritization. The analysis statically evaluates a given source code commit's risk in introducing performance regression. Performance regression testing can leverage the analysis result to test commits with high risks first while delaying or skipping testing on low-risk commits.

To validate this idea's feasibility, we conduct a study on 100 real-world performance regression issues from three widely used, open-source software. Guided by insights from the study, we design *PRA* and build a tool, PerfScope. Evaluation on the examined problematic commits shows our tool can successfully alarm 91% of them. Moreover, on 600 randomly picked *new* commits from six large-scale software, with our tool, developers just need to test only 14-22% of the 600 commits and will still be able to alert 87-95% of the commits with performance regression.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.5 [**Software Engineering**]: Testing and Debugging—*Testing tools*

## General Terms

Performance, Experimentation

## Keywords

Performance regression, performance risk analysis, cost modeling

```
int bstream_rd_db_catalogue(...)
{
  do {
    if (bcat_add_item(cat, &ti.base.base) != BSTREAM_OK)
    return BSTREAM_ERROR;
  } while (ret == BSTREAM_OK);
}
int bcat_add_item(...)
{
  switch (item->type) {
    case BSTREAM_IT_PRIVILEGE:
      Image_info::Dbobj *it1= info->add_db_object(...);
  }
}
backup::Image_info::Dbobj* Backup_info::add_db_object(...)
{
+  if (type == BSTREAM_IT_TRIGGER)  {
+    obs::Obj*tbl_obj=obs::find_table_for_trigger(...);
+  }
}
```

The new block calls an expensive function. When indirectly executed inside a loop, it can incur 80 times slowdown

**Figure 1: A real-world performance regression (80 times) issue in MySQL: the change causes an expensive function call `find_table_for_trigger` to be executed many times.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Performance Regression Testing

Performance is a vital quality metric for software system. It can directly affect user experience and job efficiency. For example, a 500 ms latency increase could cause 20% traffic loss for Google [44]. As another example, the Colorado Benefits Management System is designed to make social welfare accessible. But it runs so slowly that the system is virtually unable to accept assistance applications [18].

On the other hand, software today is evolving rapidly. Code commits[1] for feature enhancement, bug fixing or refactoring are frequently pushed to the code repository. Some of these commits, while preserving the software's functionality, may significantly degrade performance, i.e., introducing *performance regression*.

Figure 1 shows a real-world performance regression issue from MySQL. The added code commit was written without much consideration for performance. When the code gets indirectly executed inside a loop, it can cause MySQL's backup operation to be 80 times slower. After this problem was reported, developers optimized the added code and released a patch.

To provide motivating evidence, Figure 2 shows the releases containing performance regression issue(s) in a snapshot of the evo-

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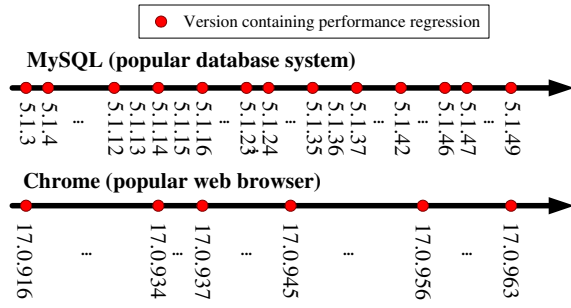[1]We use commit, revision and changeset interchangeably.

**Figure 2: Performance regression in modern popular software. Data from performance regression bug reports studied in §2.**

**Table 1: Typical running cost for popular benchmarks.**

| Category | Benchmark | Per run cost |
|---|---|---|
| Web Server | autobench,Web Polygraph,SPECweb | 3 min–1 hr |
| Database | pgbench,sysbench,DBT2 | 10 min–3 hrs |
| Compiler | CP2K,Polyhedron,SPEC CPU | 1 hr–20 hrs |
| OS | lmbench,Phoronix Test Suite | 2 hrs–24 hrs |

lution history for two popular, performance-critical, open-source software. These regression issues were user-reported ones, i.e., post-release. We can see that regressing releases are prevalent across the evolution history of these two software packages.

Performance regression often damages software's usability considerably. In one example [7], switching from MySQL 4.1 to 5.0 in a production e-commerce website caused the loading time of the same web page to increase from 1 second to 20 seconds. This made the website almost unusable. The reporter complained that *"MySQL 5 is no good for production until this bug is fixed"*. As another example, after upgrading GCC from 4.3 to 4.5, Mozilla developers experienced an up to 19% performance regression, which forced them to reconsider a complete switchover [29].

Performance regression has been a known problem for mature and performance-conscious software projects. For example, in many software issue tracking systems, there is a special category to annotate issues related to performance. In the case of MySQL, a separate severity level (S5) is used to mark performance-related reports. Interestingly, among a set of 50 randomly sampled MySQL performance regression issues (§2), almost half of them were also tagged as S1 (Critical) or S2 (Serious).

## 1.2 Performance Regression Testing Challenges

An effective way to combat performance regression is to employ systematic, continuous performance regression testing. This is widely advocated in academia [28, 57, 24, 46], open source community [45, 15, 36, 21] and industry [6].

Ideally, the testing should be carried out as comprehensively and intensively as possible, i.e., on every source commit basis. This can eliminate the "last-minute surprise" wherein performance issues are exposed too late to be fixed before release [16]. More importantly, this would avoid the tedious and lengthy diagnosis process to figure out which commit is responsible for the observed performance regression.

Unfortunately, despite the obvious benefits, real practices often cannot afford performance regression testing for every commit due to the combination of two factors: the high performance testing overhead and the rapid software evolution pace.

Performance testing is supposed to measure systems under representative and comprehensive workloads. It can take hours to days

**Table 2: Estimated commit and performance testing frequency in popular software.**

| Software | Avg. Rev. per Day | Regular Perf. Testing |
|---|---|---|
| MySQL | ∼ 6 | every release [49] |
| Chrome | ∼ 140 | every 4 rev. |
| Linux | ∼ 140 | every week [21] |

to complete even with a number of dedicated machines [3, 21, 23]. Table 1 lists the typical *per run* cost of several popular benchmarks. A comprehensive performance testing often includes not only these benchmarks but also load and stress testing suites. In a leading, public US data warehousing company that we collaborate with (anonymized as required), some internal test cases can take almost one week to just load the data.

What's more, performance testing results are subject to external factors such as caching and testing environment load. To minimize experimental errors, performance testing should be carried out in a clean environment for a period long enough and repeated several times until the performance becomes stable [36, 5, 1]. Consequently, performance testing guide often advocates to "never believe any test that runs for only a few seconds" [9, 46]. In this sense, performance testing is by nature time and resource consuming.

On the other hand, the increasingly favored rapid development methodologies such as agile development [43] are catalyzing software revision speed. As Table 2 shows, Chrome and Linux have more than 100 revisions per day merged into the code base. With the high revision rate and high testing cost, it is almost impractical to run comprehensive performance testing on every commit.

## 1.3 Current Practices

The above factors often cause performance regression testing frequency to be compromised. Testing is carried out on daily or per release basis (Table 2). When performance regression is exposed, developers have to spend extra efforts bisecting [4] *which* commit among the recently committed changes causes the problem. For example, in diagnosing a Chrome performance regression issue [2] revealed during testing, there were six revisions included since last testing. The developers had to conduct bisection to narrow down the problematic commit, which already took hours.

With performance test case prioritization, a technique as used in feature regression testing [51, 25], the testing frequency can be increased but at the cost of reduced comprehensiveness. In this scheme, test cases are divided into multiple levels based on their overhead and ability to catch performance issues. Then lightweight test cases with high detection rate are run more frequently while costly tests are run infrequently. Our industry collaborator adopted this practice. Such prioritization is effective to capture easy-to-trigger performance regression. But the detection of complicated issues that are manifested only under the comprehensive test cases are delayed because of reduced comprehensiveness.

## 1.4 Our Contributions

Given that performance testing frequency and the commit speed are not in synchrony, it is important to fully utilize the testing cost. To this end, it is desired to devote testing on exactly the regressing commits and skip non-regressing commits. But existing practices as above all treat the **testing target**—code commits—as *black-box*, ignoring the valuable information in commit content that may be exploited to direct performance testing on the right target. Consequently, the testing is carried out *blindly* even for commits that are unlikely to introduce performance regression.

**Table 3: Studied software.**

| Software | Description | LOC | # of Issues |
|---|---|---|---|
| MySQL | DBMS | 1.2M | 50 |
| PostgreSQL | DBMS | 651K | 25 |
| Chrome | Web browser | 6.0M | 25 |

Our work takes this complementary approach by leveraging the information in each code commit to help prioritize performance regression testing on risky commits. In particular, by conducting a lightweight, static *performance risk analysis* (abbr. **PRA**, hereafter) on source code change, we estimate the risk of this revision in introducing performance regression issues. Based on such estimation, we can prioritize performance testing to conduct more comprehensive tests for high-risk revisions while lowering the testing cost for low-risk ones.

For example, by statically analyzing the added code in Figure 1, we know it can be executed indirectly inside a loop. With static cost estimation and profile information, our *PRA* will recommend this commit to be tested heavily. On the other hand, for commits like adding few arithmetic operations in a cold path, we could suggest skipping testing or testing it lightly.

The major contributions of this paper are:

- We conduct an empirical study on 100 real-world performance regression issues from three widely used software to gain insights on the feasibility and approaches for testing target prioritization with commit performance risk analysis.
- To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to propose a white-box approach on prioritizing performance testing *targets* with code change performance risk analysis (*PRA*) to make performance regression testing more efficient.
- We implement a tool and release it in open source. Evaluation on the studied commits as well as 600 randomly selected *new* commits shows that based on the recommendation of our tool, developers just need to test only 14-22% of the 600 code commits and will be able to catch 87-95% of all performance risky commits.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING REAL WORLD PERFORMANCE REGRESSION ISSUES

To validate the feasibility of performance regression testing target prioritization and design an effective *PRA*, we conduct an empirical study on 100 randomly selected real-world performance regression issues from three widely used, open source software. The study focuses on understanding what kind of code changes would cause performance regression and how they impact performance.

Designing in this bottom-up manner may suffer from the overfitting problem. To address this concern, we also evaluate our proposed *PRA* on 600 randomly selected *new* code commits that are not used in the study described here.

### 2.1 Software Studied

Table 3 lists the details of studied software. We choose these software packages because they are performance critical, top-rated, widely used and industry-backed. Chrome is developed by Google; MySQL is now owned by Oracle; and PostgreSQL's development team consists of employees from Red Hat. Besides, their long evolution history and well-maintained issue tracking systems provide us with many real-world performance regression issues.

### 2.2 Issue Collection Methodology

For each software, we first query the tracking system or mailing list with a set of broad performance-related keywords like "perfor-

mance", "hit", "drop", "slow", "slower" on resolved issues. After getting this initial collection of issues, we manually go over each to prune out those issues unrelated to performance regression. Finally, we randomly sample 100 issues of which not only the fixes can be found, but also the responsible change set can be tracked.

### 2.3 Threats to Validity

**Construct Validity** Our study has high construct validity because all the issues we collect are indeed related to performance regression issues based on issue symptom description from the reporter and confirmation of issue fix from the developer.

**Internal Validity** There is potential selection bias in our study. We try to minimize it by first covering diverse categories and representative software. Except for Chrome which is landed in 2008, the other two software projects have more than 10 years of history. Additionally, the issues we study for each software are *randomly* sampled without favoring or ignoring particular type of performance regression issues. For each issue, we write a diagnosis report and have at least 2 inspectors agree on the understanding.

Another potential threat is unreported performance regression issues. It is difficult to measure quantitatively them. However, we believe that at least the reported issues are of importance.

**External Validity** Although we believe our study provides interesting findings on performance regression issues in studied representative software, they may not be generalized to other software projects beyond the specific scope this study was conducted. Thus they should be taken with limitations in mind.

Most importantly, we want to emphasize the primary purpose of this study is for ourselves to gain insights for designing *PRA*, instead of drawing any general conclusions. Therefore, the potential threats to validity in the study will only impair the efficacy of our design. Nevertheless, as evaluation demonstrates (§5), the *PRA* guided by this study is indeed effective, even for 600 *new* code commits that are not examined in our empirical study.

### 2.4 Code Change Categorization

To analyze what kind of code changes are likely to introduce performance regression, we develop a taxonomy. The key rationale is that program performance depends on how expensive an operation is and how many times the operation gets executed. Therefore, performance regression could be introduced by either more expensive operations or regular operations but executed many times in a critical path. As a starting point, we need to look into *what* and *where* are the code changes in their execution context. Moreover, we need to consider code changes that *indirectly* impact expensive operations or critical path. For example, a code change that modifies a variable controlling the loop iteration count in a critical path may have a big impact on performance. We further zoom into each of the three perspective and divide it into subcategories. The subcategories may not exclusive. For example, in the *where* perspective, a change could lie in both a loop and a primitive function. We choose the first applicable subcategory in top to bottom order.

In our study, we consider only code changes that are the culprits for performance regression, ignoring innocent changes in the same commit. Also we focus on changes that impact the performance of existing functionalities, ignoring changes for independent, *new* functionalities that do not interact with existing ones. The result based on this categorization methodology is presented in Table 4.

#### 2.4.1 Where a Change Takes Place

Program scopes such as loop or primitive function are performance sensitive places. It is because these places can be executed or called many times and magnify any overhead added inside them.

**Table 4: Categorization of issues examined from three perspectives.**

| Category | | Software | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | MySQL | PostgreSQL | Chrome |
| **Where the change takes place** | | | | |
| API (*Can be called a lot of times by external program*) | | 5 (10%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4%) |
| Primitive(Utility) Function (*Can be called a lot of times internally, e.g.* `mutex_spin_wait`) | | 9 (18%) | 4 (16%) | 1 (4%) |
| Routine Function (*Will definitely be called under various input, e.g.* `MySQLParse`) | | 7 (14%) | 4 (16%) | 8 (32%) |
| Loop (*Can have multiple iterations*) | | 12 (24%) | 8 (32%) | 4 (16%) |
| Others | | 17 (34%) | 9 (36%) | 11 (44%) |
| **What the change modifies** | | | | |
| Expensive Function Call (e.g. Figure 4) | | 21 (42%) | 9 (36%) | 16 (64%) |
| Performance Sensitive Condition (e.g. Figure 5) | | 8 (16%) | 6 (24%) | 4 (16%) |
| Performance Critical Variable (e.g. Figure 3) | | 6 (12%) | 5 (20%) | 2 (8%) |
| Others (e.g. overhaul) | | 15 (30%) | 5 (20%) | 3 (12%) |
| **How the change impacts performance** | | | | |
| Direct (e.g. Figure 1) | | 34 (68%) | 11 (44%) | 12 (48%) |
| Indirect, Latent | Through Function Return Value (e.g. Figure 5) | 7 (14%) | 7 (28%) | 3 (12%) |
| | Through Function Referential Parameter (e.g. Figure 3) | 5 (10%) | 4 (16%) | 1 (4%) |
| | Through Class Member | 1 (2%) | 1 (4%) | 3 (12%) |
| | Through Global Variable | 1 (2%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4%) |
| | Others | 2 (4%) | 2 (8%) | 5 (20%) |
| **Total** | | 50 | 25 | 25 |

Hence we first categorize all the problematic changes based on the scopes that they lie in.

We also need to be context sensitive and consider call paths. For example in Figure 1, although the added expensive function call `find_table_for_trigger` is not inside loop in the static context, if the expensive call path is executed, it will be dynamically executed in a tight loop (loop that iterates many times). Therefore, when we design *PRA*, we need to be context sensitive and examine possible call paths.

Table 4 shows more than half of the problematic changes are located in performance sensitive scopes. However, using change scope as the sole indicator of performance regression can miss some performance killers that can influence critical paths via data and control flow. That is why there are a significant number of regression issues in the *Others* subcategory in Table 4. For this reason, we further categorize the change content.

> **Implication**: *PRA* should pay attention to common performance critical places such as loop and primitive function. But using only place as criteria can incur high analysis inaccuracy.

### 2.4.2 What a Change Modifies

Intuitively, for a change set to introduce performance regression, it needs to add high overhead (computation or I/O). Such influence can happen in two ways: one case is that the change directly adds significant cost into hot path; another case is that the change modifies some "control" variables which result in an expensive code region to iterate more times or take a longer execution path.

The former case is straightforward (especially if our *PRA* can be context sensitive), whereas the latter would require us to consider some special variables and their control and data dependencies. We refer to the variable of which different values can result in dramatically different performance as *performance critical variable* (e.g., loop iteration count, database table index variable as in Figure 3) and the condition that controls whether a critical path will be taken in a branch as *performance sensitive condition* (e.g., the branch condition in function `create_sort_index` in Figure 5).

In the study, we obtain information regarding whether operations are expensive or performance critical by reading the bug reports and consulting with developers. In our implementation of *PRA*, we obtain such information from static analysis and profiling.

As table 4 shows, expensive function calls is the most common problematic change content. But other types of changes such as modifying the performance critical variable and performance sensitive condition also cause a significant number of performance regression issues in the dataset.

> **Implication**: *PRA* should also account for the code change content to identify costly instructions and performance critical variables or sensitive conditions.

### 2.4.3 How a Change Impacts Performance

As explained above, not all problematic changes affect performance in a direct way. A change may propagate via data and control flow that eventually causes a performance problem in its forward slice. For example, in Figure 5, although the change itself is not expensive, it modifies the function return value, which later determines whether an expensive `filesort` is called.

Thus we divide all the perilous changes into two categories based on how they impact performance: (1) changes that directly degrade performance in its execution scope; (2) changes that indirectly cause performance problem later in other code regions.

Table 4 shows the majority of the issues belong to the first category. But there are also a significant number of issues impacting performance indirectly. For these issues, the table also lists the program constructs through which the change propagates its effect to critical paths and thereby leads to performance degradation. Most of them are through function return values.

> **Implication**: *PRA* should follow the control and data flow to factor in the indirect effect of a change. The analysis should be inter-procedural and context-sensitive.

## 2.5 Case Studies

We now go through three performance regression issues from MySQL as case studies.

The issue in Figure 4 is introduced when patching a functionality bug in MySQL Cluster. This commit changes the system call `clock_gettime` argument to use `CLOCK_MONOTONIC` instead of real-time clock to prevent potential hang in certain scenarios. But in some platform like Solaris, `clock_gettime` call is expensive when using `CLOCK_MONOTONIC`. This extra overhead is further amplified when it is called in a tight loop.

```
uint make_join_readinfo(JOIN *join, ulonglong options)
{
    for (i=join->const_tables ; i < join->tables ; i++) {
        JOIN_TAB *tab=join->join_tab+i;
+       if (table->s->primary_key != MAX_KEY &&
+           table->file->primary_key_is_clustered())
+         tab->index= table->s->primary_key;
+       else
          tab->index=find_shortest_key(table, ...);
    }
}
int join_read_first(JOIN_TAB *tab)
{
    if (!table->file->inited)
        table->file->ha_index_init(tab->index, tab->sorted);
}
```

The new logic prefers clustered primary index over secondary ones. It degrades performance for certain workloads.

**Figure 3: MySQL performance regression issue #35850**

```
NDB_TICKS NdbTick_CurrentMillisecond(void)
{
    struct timespec tick_time;
-   clock_gettime(CLOCK_REALTIME, &tick_time);
+   clock_gettime(CLOCK_MONOTONIC, &tick_time);

    return tick_time.tv_sec * MILLISEC_PER_SEC +
        tick_time.tv_nsec / MILLISEC_PER_NANOSEC;
}
```

Replacing realtime clock with monotonic for clock_gettime syscall has performance loss in Solaris. When put in loop, this loss can be up to 15%

```
int waitClusterStatus(const char* _addr,...)
{
    while (allInState == false){ ...
            time_now = NdbTick_CurrentMillisecond();
    }
}
```

**Figure 4: MySQL performance regression issue #46183**

In Figure 5, function `test_if_skip_sort_order` decides whether it can leverage database table index to perform the ORDER BY query or an actual file-sort is necessary. The new optimization rule prefers file-sort with a join buffer over an index scan if possible. In such case, it returns 0. However, when an index is clustered, index scan can actually be much faster than the preferred file-sort. As a result, this premature optimization code change causes performance slowdowns for these types of data layout.

Similarly, the new optimization in Figure 3 prefers clustered primary key over secondary key. While this can speed up disk-bound workloads, it slows down cases when the data is in disk cache.

# 3. PERFORMANCE RISK ANALYSIS

## 3.1 Overview

The objective of *PRA* is to examine source code commit content and determine whether the commit is likely to introduce performance regression. Therefore, *PRA* is a white-box approach. But *PRA* is not meant to replace performance regression testing. On the contrary, its main consumer is performance regression testing. It recommends risky commits to performance regression testing to test comprehensively and suggests skipping low-risk commits.

This role relaxes the safety and soundness requirement for *PRA*. In the extreme case, if *PRA* recommends every commit to be tested, it is the same situation as testing without *PRA*; if *PRA* recommends to skip a commit that is actually risky, it is similar as conducting infrequent such as per-release testing. That said, *PRA* should aim

```
bool test_if_skip_sort_order(...)
{
    if (select_limit >= table_records) {
+       /* filesort() and join cache are usually
+          faster than reading in index order
+          and not using join cache */
+       if (tab->type == JT_ALL && ...)
+         DBUG_RETURN(0);
    }
    DBUG_RETURN(1);
}
int create_sort_index()
{
    if ((order != join->group_list || ... &&
        test_if_skip_sort_order(...))
        DBUG_RETURN(0);
    table->sort.found_records=filesort(thd,
        table,join->sortorder, ...);
}
```

The new control flow can change the function return value, which later affects whether an expensive path (with *firesort* call) will be taken or not

**Figure 5: MySQL performance regression issue #50843**

to flag the commits' risk accurately to be able to truly improve performance regression testing efficiency.

## 3.2 PRA Design

*PRA* is essentially static performance risk estimation of code changes. The challenge is how to reason about performance impact without actually running the software. Guided by the real world issue study, the performance impact of a code change depends on the cost of change operations (whether it is expensive or not) and the frequency of its execution (whether it lies in hot path or not).

Therefore, we design *PRA* as follows. First, we use a cost model to estimate the expensiveness of a change instruction. If the change touches performance sensitive conditional expression, it is also considered expensive. Then, we estimate the frequency of the change instruction. With the two estimations, we index them into a risk matrix to assess the risk level. The risk levels for the entire patch can then be aggregated into a single risk score.

### 3.2.1 Cost Modeling

To establish a systematic and efficient estimation regarding the expensiveness information, a static cost model for different operations is necessary. The cost modeling will determine whether a change instruction is expensive or not.

Since the purpose of the modeling emphasizes on relative cost rather than absolute cost, we express cost in abstract unit, denoted as $\delta$, instead of actual CPU cycles. With simple architecture model and heuristics, we build a basic cost table for different instructions based on its type and operands. For example, `add` instruction has cost $\delta$, `multiply` has cost $4\delta$ and `call` instruction has the cost equal to calling convention overhead plus the callee's cost.

A basic block's cost is a sum of the cost of those instructions that live inside the basic block. For control flows, we adopt worst case analysis. For example, the cost of a function or a loop body is the maximum cost among the static paths.

Next, we assume if an operation has cost $\delta$, and it's executed 10 times, the aggregated cost is $10\delta$. While this assumption doesn't account for factors such as compiler optimization, it is a good start for the purpose of risk assessment. Then for a loop, if its **trip count** (maximum number of iterations) can be statically inferred, we multiply the loop body's cost by the trip count as the loop's cost. Otherwise, the loop is considered to be potentially expensive.

**Table 5: Risk matrix of a change's expensiveness and frequency**

| Expensiveness | Frequency | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Frequent | Normal | Rare |
| Expensive | Extreme | High | Moderate |
| Normal | High | Moderate | Low |
| Minor | Moderate | Low | Low |

With this model, we can obtain cost in terms of $\delta$, whereas *PRA* needs to gauge whether the cost is expensive or not. We use thresholds to convert the cost into level. Such thresholds can be configured or computed automatically by running the cost model on the whole program to obtain cost distribution for functions and basic blocks. Then the cost of a change is ranked in the distribution to convert to expensiveness. Besides this static model, we also allow users to add dynamic profile information or domain knowledge to make *PRA* more accurate. But this is only optional for *PRA*.

The above modeling mainly deals with *add* code change type. Code change can also be deleting or replacing statements. For *delete* type changes, we can offset their direct cost from the total cost. In current implementation, we do not want to make *PRA* aggressive that miss potential performance regression issues due to inaccurate offsetting. Therefore, the cost of a delete change is by default 0. The theoretical cost for a *replace* type change would be $new.cost - old.cost$. But for similar reason, the cost of a replace change is the cost of new program elements. The exception is: if a delete or replace change touches performance sensitive variables or conditions, the change cost is directly assigned to be expensive.

### 3.2.2 Performance Sensitive Condition/Variable

Condition expressions need special attention. Conditional branch instruction itself is rarely costly. But as seen from the real world study, a condition can significantly influence whether an expensive path will be taken or not. We define a branch condition to be performance sensitive if its intra-procedural paths (successors) have dramatic cost difference, which is estimated using above cost model. For example, the branch condition for the first `if` statement in function `create_sort_index` in Figure 5 is a performance sensitive condition. Change affecting such performance sensitive condition is considered expensive.

For performance critical variable, we currently only considers variable that can affect loop termination condition. We leave systematically identifying performance critical variable such as the table index variable in future work.

### 3.2.3 Frequency Estimation

In addition to estimating the cost of change content, we should also analyze whether the change lies in hot path. To do this, we first analyze the intra-procedural scope that a change lies in. If the change is enclosed in any loop and the trip count of this loop including all its parent loops can be statically determined, the execution frequency of this change instruction is estimated by the product of these trip counts. Otherwise, if any of enclosing loop has non-determined trip count, it is considered to be possibly executed frequently. Similarly code change that lies in recursive functions is also assessed to be potentially frequently executed.

Next, we examine the call path backward that could potentially reach the function where the change is located and perform similar frequency estimation for each call site. In implementation, the level of call path length is bounded. Given the estimation, we conclude if a change lies in the context that may be frequently executed using a ranking of the frequency count.
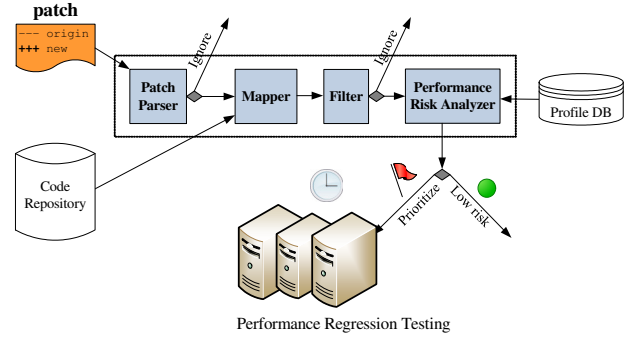


**Figure 6: Architecture of our *PRA* implementation, PerfScope**

### 3.2.4 Risk Matrix

Combining the above two pieces of information, we use a risk matrix (Table 5) to assess the risk. Such matrix can be extended to express more expensiveness/frequency categories and risk levels. The output of *PRA* is therefore the risk level distributions. We also calculate a simple risk score based on the distribution:

$$\text{Risk Score} = N_{extreme} \times 100 + N_{high} \times 10$$
$$+ N_{moderate} \times \frac{1}{100} + N_{low} \times \frac{1}{1000} \quad (1)$$

Practitioners can then define testing target selection criteria against the risk level distribution or summary score. For example, commits with $N_{extreme} >= 5 || N_{high} >= 20$ or whose risk score exceeds 300 require comprehensive testing. Like in choosing the criteria in performance testing to judge regression, for different software, these criteria may also require some initial tuning.

### 3.2.5 Indirect Risk

As Section 2 shows, in addition to direct performance impact, there are also a number of risk commits that indirectly affect performance via data flow and control flow to their forward slice, the program subset that may be affected by a given program point. Therefore, we extend the basic *PRA* with the ability to analyze such cases, named *PRA-Slicing*. We use static program slicing techniques [55] to compute a forward slice of the change set. Then we check if any element in the slice is performance sensitive or not using the logic as described in 3.2.2. The final risk level is only assigned once to the change instruction instead of its slice. The slicing is interprocedural and bounded to a limited depth. While *PRA-Slicing* can catch more complicated risky commits, it may also recommend excessive commits due to the imprecisions in the slicing. Moreover, computing precise slice can be expensive. Consequently, *PRA-Slicing* remains an extension to the main *PRA* analysis and is disabled by default.

## 4. IMPLEMENTATION

We develop a tool called *PerfScope* that implements the proposed *PRA* on top of the LLVM compiler infrastructure [39]. The tool is released in open source at

    http://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~peh003/perfscope.

### 4.1 Architecture

We first briefly describe the architecture of PerfScope. It consists of five components (Figure 6).

**Parser** parses patch information regarding the changed files, lines and types (*add*, *delete*, *change*). For the change type, unified `diff`

file contains *add* and *delete* but no *replace*. The parser will pair *delete* with *add* and reduce them to *replace*.

**Mapper** extracts debug information of a program, build search trees and map given lines to the program constructs, if any, which are fed to the filter.

**Filter** prunes out insignificant change such as stylish change or renaming. If all changes in the entire commit are filtered, the commit will be considered trivial and not fed to the analyzer.

**Profile database (optional)** allows users to incorporate profile information and domain knowledge that may make *PRA* more accurate. Such profile can be practically incorporated because for large software, the cost of many functions doesn't change very frequently. Therefore, the profile does not need frequent update.

But note that, *PRA* already provides a cost model (§3.2.1). The profile information is only optional. Interestingly, we obtained the profiles for several software using a popular low-overhead, system-wide profiler—*OProfile* [8], and found the expensive function list has a large portion of overlap with the list computed by *PRA*.

**Performance risk analyzer** runs *PRA* or PRA-Slicing on the language constructs remained after filtering. It computes the risk level (e.g., *extreme*, *high*, *moderate*) of a change using a risk matrix like in Table 5). The output of the analyzer is a risk level distribution from all changes in the commit and a summary risk score. The two results can be used by performance testing practitioners to determine the performance testing strategy for the commit.

## 4.2 Challenges

There are two key challenges in implementing PerfScope.

**Mapping**: Raw information in patch files produced by standard tools like `diff` are language agnostic and in line granularity. But *PRA* works on language constructs. For example, it needs to know the change on line 10 corresponds to an *if* statement.

LLVM provides debugging information such as line number, file path attached in instructions. We use this information to build a search tree. We first find the compile unit for the changed source files, then match the top level constructs such as functions inside that unit and finally the corresponding instruction(s).

**Filtering**: There are changes on non-source files such as the documentations, test cases. It is unlikely for them to introduce performance regression. We predefine a set of source code suffixes, e.g., *.c, .cpp*, to filter non-source changes. We also prune changes on source files that essentially do not alter the program (e.g., add comments, rename variables). We only perform safe, simple checking instead of trying to determine general equivalence of two programs, which is undecidable. Algorithm 1 shows the filtering logic.

## 5. EVALUATION

This section evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of our *PRA* implementation, *PerfScope*. It consists of six parts. First, we test whether PerfScope is able to report these problematic commits from our real-world issue study. Second, to address the overfitting concern, we also evaluate *PRA* using 600 *new* commits from both studied software and unstudied ones. Third, we evaluate *PRA-Slicing* extension and also compare our design with random test target selection. Fourth, we estimate the practical testing cost savings with *PRA*. Fifth, we show the sensitivity of parameters used in the experiment. The last part shows the overhead of PerfScope.

## 5.1 Subject Software

Six large-scale (up to millions of lines of code), popular open-source software are used as our subjects. They range from database system (MySQL, PostgreSQL), compiler (GCC), web (caching) server (Apache, Squid) and JavaScript Engine (V8, used in Chrome).

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**Algorithm 1** Determine if a change is trivial

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**Input:** change $C$, source code suffix set *Suffixes*, before-revision program *OldP*, after-revision program *NewP*
**Output:** True if $C$ is trivial, False otherwise
 1: **if** C.file.suffix $\notin$ Suffixes **then**
 2:     **return** True
 3: **end if**
 4: /* map: get instructions at a line in a program */
 5: new_instrs $\leftarrow$ map(C.new_line, NewP)
 6: old_instrs $\leftarrow$ map(C.old_line, OldP)
 7: **if** new_instrs.empty **and** old_instrs.empty **then**
 8:     /* change only comments, spaces, etc. */
 9:     **return** True
10: **end if**
11: **if** new_instrs.size $\neq$ old_instrs.size **then**
12:     /* change added or deleted instructions */
13:     **return** False
14: **end if**
15: **for** $i \leftarrow 1$ **to** new_instrs.size **do**
16:     /* diff: compare two instructions' opcodes and operands */
17:     **if** diff(old_instrs[i], new_instrs[i]) = True **then**
18:         **return** False
19:     **end if**
20: **end for**
21: **return** True

---

**Table 6: Subject Software.**

| Software | LOC | Studied? |
|----------|-----|----------|
| MySQL | 1.2M | Yes |
| PostgreSQL | 651K | Yes |
| Apache httpd | 220K | **No** |
| Squid | 751K | **No** |
| GCC | 4.6M | **No** |
| V8 | 680K | **No** |

Among them, GCC, Apache, Squid and V8 are *not* used in our real-world study. Table 6 summarizes the details.

## 5.2 Methodology

**Table 7: Benchmarks and regression thresholds used for subject software. §5.2.1 describes how we obtain the thresholds.**

| Software | Benchmarks | Threshold |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| MySQL | DBT2, SysBench, sql-bench | 6% |
| PostgreSQL | DBT2, SysBench, pgbench | 6% |
| Apache httpd | SPECweb2005, autobench, ab | 20% |
| Squid | Web Polygraph, autobench | 10% |
| GCC | CP2K, SPEC CPU2006 | 3% |
| V8 | Octane, SunSpider | 10% |

### 5.2.1 Ground Truth for New Commits

For the studied commits, we already know they caused performance regressions. But for the new commits, since they are taken from recent code repository, few feedback on them exists. We need to get the ground truth for *each* commit with respect to whether it may introduce performance regression. Therefore, we run multiple standard, moderately intensive performance benchmarks on each compiled revision of subject software. These benchmarks are often used internally and in user-reported regression cases. Each benchmarking is run multiple times.

**Table 8: Coverage of studied problematic commits.**

| Software | Buggy Rev. | PRA (Ratio) |
|---|---|---|
| MySQL | 39 | 36 |
| PostgreSQL | 25 | 23 |
| Total | 64 | 59 (**92%**) |

With the benchmarking results, we can compute the performance deviation of a commit from the previous commit. Then if the deviation exceeds certain threshold, the commit introduces performance regression. Therefore what thresholds to use for judging performance regression is crucial. However, there is inevitable bias in choosing the criteria because performance regression is a *fundamentally subjective* definition. Different practitioners and software use different judgment. For example, in our real-world study, the user-reported performance regression issues contain a variety of criteria even for the same software.

To reduce the inevitable selection bias, we refer to the common practices. In particular, we sample each software's issue tracker, code commit comment and developer posts to see what degree of performance deviation starts to attract practitioners' attention. We then choose the *minimum* as our criteria. Table 7 lists the benchmarks and thresholds we use for each software.

Sometimes the commit causing *repeatable* regression (i.e., the regression is observed consistently when the testing is exercised several times) may not be a performance bug but rather an expected performance behavior (e.g., a patch adding authentication step to existing work flow introduces performance overhead). It is up to developers to decide whether a repeatable regression is expected or not. *PRA* is *not* a performance bug detector. It mainly serves performance testing and therefore only target on repeatable regression rather than performance bug. Therefore, if *PRA* recommends a commit that can indeed manifest repeatable regression in performance testing, the recommendation is considered to be useful.

### 5.2.2 Setup

The benchmarking is carried out on three dedicated machines, each with Intel i7 Quad Core CPU 3.40 GHz, 16GB RAM. The performance overhead measurement is run on the same machines. Additionally, as *PRA* outputs the distribution of the change set's risk levels and a score, we need a criterion for recommending performance regression testing. We set it to be if risk score (Equation 1) is larger than 200. §5.7 evaluates the sensitivity of this criterion.

## 5.3 Evaluation on Studied Commits

Table 8 presents the coverage on the studied problematic commits. 11 commits from MySQL issue study are omitted because these changes are for source languages other than C/C++, which our tool currently supports. Chrome is not evaluated because the compiler our analysis bases on, LLVM Clang, cannot reliably compile Chrome into whole-program LLVM bitcode files for analysis rather than because of our analysis.

As the table shows, *PRA* can report majority (92%) of these regressing commits. Although the basic *PRA* does not implement slicing, it still can capture cases in the "Indirect" category in Table 4. This is because, the categorization only focuses on the *root cause*. It can be the case that a change impacts performance indirectly but happens to lie in a loop.

A few cases are missed by *PRA* either because of long propagation impact or complicated domain knowledge. Listing 1 is such an example. More detailed profile information and deeper analysis are needed to be able to alert on them.

## 5.4 Evaluation on New Commits

Since our *PRA* design is guided by a real-world issue study, it might be tailored for these examined buggy commits. Therefore, we also evaluate the tool on 600 *new* commits from both studied and unstudied software. Table 9 presents the result.

The *After Filtering* column is the number of commits remaining after pruning. The filtered commits (by our tool) either only change non-source files or only have insignificant changes on source files. Interestingly, filtering already reduces a significant number of commits not worth consideration for performance regression testing. For example, in Apache, more than one third of the commits are just updating documentation files or code styles. We manually checked the filtered commits are indeed trivial.

Our tool PerfScope can successfully reduce at least **81%** of the 450 testing candidates (86% if no filtering is conducted in existing testing) and alarm **87%** of the new risky commits. In other words, with our tool, developers only now need to test 19% of the original 450 commits and still be able to alert 87% of the risky commits. This means our *PRA* design can significantly reduce performance testing overhead while preserving relatively high coverage.

From the table, we can also read the number of commits that are reported by PerfScope but not confirmed by our benchmarking from $Rec.\ Commits - (Risky\ Commits - Miss)$. However, they should *not* be interpreted false alarms for two reasons. First, PerfScope is not a bug detection tool but only to reduce testing overhead. These "additionally" recommended testing targets need to be tested anyway in the original performance testing scheme without using *PRA*. Second, the *Risky Commits* in the table are lower bounds because of the limitation of our benchmarking. Therefore, some of these additional commits might turn out to be indeed risky if tested more comprehensively.

## 5.5 Extension and Alternative Solution

PerfScope also implements an extension to *PRA*: *PRA-Slicing* (§3.2.5). In addition to the basic analysis, *PRA-Slicing* also performs forward slicing of each change in the commit and checks if any element in the slice is performance sensitive or not.

Table 9 also shows the evaluation of *PRA-Slicing*. *PRA-Slicing* performs deeper analysis and as a result has higher coverage (95%) but at the cost of lower reduction percentage (78%).

A simple alternative to *PRA* is random test target selection. The probability for this approach to achieve the same or better result as our tool in Table 9 is only $1.2 \times 10^{-65}$ (calculated using script [2]).

## 5.6 Practical Cost Saving

The objective of *PRA* is to reduce the testing target set to the risky commits for performance regression testing. Previous sections mainly evaluate the number of reduced testing target. How much does the reduction translate to actual testing cost saving? It depends on how comprehensive the original testing is carried out.

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[2] http://ideone.com/6d70fJ

**Table 9: Evaluation of PerfScope on new commits. *: the filtering is done automatically by our tool with Algorithm 1. For reduction rate and testing saving, larger number is based on the 600 commits; smaller number is based on the 450 commits.**

| Software | Test Commits | Risky Commits | After Filtering * | PRA | | | PRA-Slicing | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Rec. Commits (Reduction) | Miss (Coverage) | Testing Savings (hrs.) | Rec. Commits (Reduction) | Miss (Coverage) | Testing Savings (hrs.) |
| MySQL | 100 | 9 | 73 | 19 (74–81%) | 2 | 324–486 | 22 (70–78%) | 1 | 306–468 |
| PostgreSQL | 100 | 6 | 76 | 12 (84–88%) | 0 | 384–528 | 16 (79–84%) | 0 | 360–504 |
| GCC | 100 | 6 | 76 | 18 (76–82%) | 1 | 870–1230 | 19 (75–81%) | 0 | 855–1215 |
| V8 | 100 | 7 | 85 | 13 (85–87%) | 2 | 3–4 | 17 (80–83%) | 1 | 3–4 |
| Apache | 100 | 5 | 60 | 11 (82–89%) | 0 | 74–134 | 12 (80–88%) | 0 | 72–132 |
| Squid | 100 | 6 | 80 | 12 (85–88%) | 0 | 204–264 | 14 (83–86%) | 0 | 198–258 |
| Total | 600 | 39 | 450 | 85 (**81–86%**) | 5 (**87%**) | 1859–2646 | 100 (**78–83%**) | 2 (**95%**) | 1794–2581 |
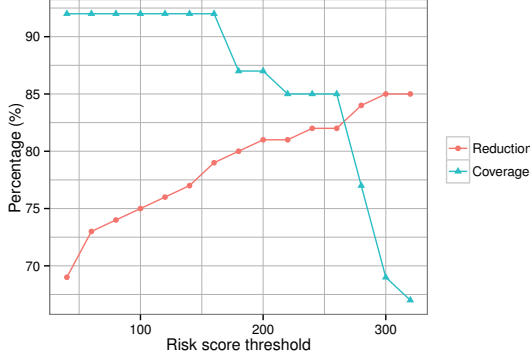


**Figure 7: Sensitivity of PerfScope's reduction rate and coverage rate of the new commits evaluation to the recommendation criterion ($\geq risk\_score\_threshold$).**

In our experiment, we run the benchmarks using recommended settings from popular performance testing guides or the tools.

Therefore, we calculate the expected testing cost saving according to our setup. As we run multiple benchmarks for each software, we use the average running cost as the per iteration testing cost. The per commit cost is calculated by multiplying the per iteration cost with 3 iterations as used in our experiment. In specifics, for MySQL and PostgreSQL, the per commit testing cost is 6 hours; for GCC, it is 15 hours; for V8, it is 3 minutes; for Apache, it is 1.5 hours; for Squid, it is 3 hours;

Table 9 lists the result. The lower saving is calculated assuming the original testing already skips all non-essential commits. The higher saving assumes no filtering is conducted. PerfScope is most useful for software whose original performance regression testing cost is big. For example, for GCC, the saving can be almost two months. However, for V8, the saving is limited because the benchmark we use only takes minutes to test one revision. Admittedly, for software whose performance testing overhead is very small, PerfScope does not save much. Directly running performance testing on every commit is then a better option. One possible usage scenario for this type of software is to run PerfScope as "cross reference" with the performance testing result.

## 5.7 Sensitivity

Since the output of *PRA* is risk level distribution and a summary score, a criterion based on the output is necessary to decide whether to recommend the given code commit to be tested. The evaluation in previous sections used the 200 risk score threshold as the criteria.

Figure 7 measures the reduction and coverage sensitivity to the risk score threshold. In general, reduction rate increases as the risk

**Table 10: PerfScope running time (in seconds) and breakdown. The numbers in parentheses are for *PRA-Slicing*.**

| Software | Loading Module | Analysis (*PRA-Slicing*) | Total (*PRA-Slicing*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| MySQL | 40 | 6 (195) | 46 (235) |
| PostgreSQL | 11 | 2 (183) | 13 (194) |
| GCC | 36 | 5 (253) | 41 (289) |
| V8 | 86 | 10 (259) | 96 (344) |
| Apache | 5 | 1 (4) | 6 (9) |
| Squid | 28 | 5 (6) | 33 (34) |

score criteria increases because higher threshold would result in fewer number of commits to be recommended and thus achieving higher reduction; in contrast, coverage decreases as the criteria increases. Such variety means, like performance regression testing result judgment criteria, the selection criteria requires initial tuning. But as seen from the figure, the sensitivity in certain threshold ranges is is small because problematic and regular commits usually have quite different risk level distribution.

## 5.8 Performance

As the primary goal of *PRA* is to reduce performance testing overhead through testing target selection, the analysis itself shouldn't become a new bottleneck.

Table 10 shows that in the evaluated software, PerfScope's average execution time is within 2 minutes for *PRA* and 6 minutes for *PRA-Slicing*. The "Loading Module" breakdown is the time to load LLVM object files for analysis using LLVM API `ParseIRFile`. It is a constant cost and occupies a large portion of the total time for both *PRA* and *PRA-Slicing*.

## 6. RELATED WORK

**Performance Regression Testing**: There are case studies and research effort on performance regression testing in software systems [21, 36, 60, 17, 30]. To name a few, [21] details the Linux kernel performance testing project to catch kernel performance regression issues. [36] shares the experience in automating regression benchmarking for the Mono project. [17] proposes a model-based performance testing framework to generate appropriate workloads. [30] offers a learning-based performance testing framework that automatically selects test input data based on learned rules. [61] uses symbolic execution to generate load test suites that expose program's diverse resource consumption behaviors.

These efforts focus building better performance regression testing infrastructure and test cases. Our work assumes the existence of good performance testing infrastructure and test cases, and improves the testing efficiency by prioritizing testing target.

**Performance Bug Detection and Analysis**: A wealth of literature exists on performance analysis with regard to performance debug-

ging [11, 53, 41, 31], performance bug detection [37, 35, 34, 59], performance regression testing result analysis [26, 27].

Similar to these work, the ultimate goal of our work is to help uncover performance problems. But we do *not* attempt to detect performance regression bugs or provide forensic diagnosis but target on recommending risky commit for performance regression testing. For the performance regression testing result analysis work, we complements the work by improving performance testing efficiency by better utilizing the testing resources on risky commit.

**Regression Testing Efficiency**: Much work has been done to reduce *functional* regression testing cost by test case selection ([22, 50]), test suite reduction([32, 19, 62]) and test cases prioritization([51, 25, 52, 38, 42]). Test case selection realizes this through selecting a subset of test cases in the test suite based on test case property and code modification information. Test suite reduction works on removing redundancy in test suite. Test case prioritization orders test case execution in a way to meet time constraints in hope to detect fault faster.

Different from these work, our goal is to reduce *performance* regression testing overhead via testing target prioritization. In functional regression testing, work that also analyzes code modifications focuses on code coverage. But in the context of performance, more important is information such as whether an operation is expensive or lies in critical path. The analysis we propose is specifically for assessing commits' performance risk.

There are also practices on improving performance regression testing efficiency mainly through hierarchical test case organization. We differ from them in that we take a white-box approach to prioritize test *target* by analyzing commit content.

**Impact Analysis**: There is fruitful work on software change impact analysis techniques to compute the set of program elements that may be affected by the change (*impact set*) [14, 56, 13, 47, 10, 20, 12]. They can be broadly divided into three categories: static analysis based [14, 56, 13], dynamic execution based [40, 47, 48, 12] and history-based [63, 54].

Our proposed method is inspired by these work. The key difference is that we focus on the *performance risk implication* of change, instead of the *impact set*. *PRA* assesses the risk of a code change to introduce performance regression in addition to the impact set.

Additionally, many impact analysis work focuses on function level. But *PRA* needs to examine more fine grained statement level for detailed analysis. This not only poses challenges in the analysis but also on mapping from textual changes to the corresponding programming constructs (§4.2).

**Worst-Case Execution Time Analysis**: Analyzing the worst case execution time (WCET) [33, 58] of a task to be executed on a specific hardware is a necessary process for reliable real-time system because of its stringent timing constraints. Our *PRA* is similar as the static approach in WCET analysis. For example both *PRA* and WCET analysis needs to use control flow information and bound calculation to determine the worst case execution path.

However, WCET analysis mainly applies to real-time systems as they have restricted form of programming (e.g., no recursion allowed). *PRA* works on regular performance-critical software written in standard C/C++ that supports generic programming constructs. The biggest size of tasks analyzed by WCET analysis tool is around 50K LOC [58]. *PRA* can scale to millions of LOC for regular software.

More importantly, *PRA* does not aim to predict the absolute performance bound for the entire program. Instead, *PRA* calculates the relative performance *risk* introduced by given code change to reduce testing target set. The analysis is focused in code change

scopes. This makes *PRA* light-weight enough to fit in the performance testing cycle. In contrast, WCET analysis needs to obtain a safe bound as a worst-case guarantee for the entire program. It therefore requires careful modeling of underlying architectural behaviors (e.g., branch prediction) and often requires user annotations (e.g., loop bounds, flow facts), which is very expensive to perform on a per-commit basis to be used by performance testing.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are limitations in the current implementation that we are considering for future work.

First, our *PRA* is designed to recommend straightforward performance regression issues. While this makes the analysis lightweight, the analysis may not accurately assess the risk of sophisticated performance regression issues such as resource contention, caching effect. Second, although our cost model is generic for both computation and I/O, detailed modeling and profiling are needed if I/O behavior is of particular interest. Therefore our current modeling has limited applicability to software like OS kernel. Also our model does not apply to networked software. Third, since for a commit that is considered to be potentially risky, *PRA* knows the program points that are risky. With the risky program points and test cases' coverage information, we are extending the analysis to not only select testing target but also recommend which test case may potentially expose the performance issue in the risky version.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we propose a new approach, performance risk analysis (*PRA*), to improve performance regression testing efficiency through testing target prioritization. It analyzes the risk of a given code commit in introducing performance regression. To gain deep understanding of perilous commits' code characteristics, we conduct a study on 100 randomly sampled *real-world* performance regression issues from three large popular software. Based on the insights from the study, we propose a *PRA* design and implement a tool, PerfScope. Evaluation on the studied problematic commits shows PerfScope can successfully recommend 92% of them for testing. We also evaluate the tool on 600 *new* commits that are not studied. PerfScope significantly reduces the testing overhead by recommending only 14-22% of the 600 commits and is still able to cover 87-95% of the risky commits. Experiment demonstrates the analysis is lightweight. The source code of PerfScope is released at `http://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~peh003/perfscope`.

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