Smarter Merge Tool for Structured Java Code

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1 Abstract

Software merging is a necessity for large-scale software development and while there are many code version systems to help with this, many of them don't take the structure of the code into account. Understanding the semantic and the syntactic structure of the code helps automate merging further, which in turn requires less effort from the developer at commit.

We propose a tool that would attempt to automate merging and also assist the user in identifying the changes by analysing the semantics of the code. We intend to use PDStore[1] to store the code in a structured manner that can be used in a versioning system. The proposal also highlights the requirements, milestones and possible evaluation methods for the research project.

2 Motivation

Today's code version systems are based on textual comparisons. Being textual based means that they do not understand the structure of the code, and as a result the tools are unable to assist the developer with code merging. This gave motivation to utilise the extra information that can aid in the merging.

We aim to develop a language-aware code versioning system based on PDStore. In particular, we will utilize structured data to visualize changes to the structure of a source code file to assist with merging.

3 Literature review

[1] proposes a novel method for merging code clones and presents a successful case study conducted by using the Aries tool which uses to identify code clones and merge them. The method described in [1] consists of a two phase process, where code clones that can be refactored are quickly detected, and the metrics are measured which indicate how the detected code clones should be merged.

[2] describes a tool called "Semantic diff" and techniques used in that tool to show the effect of modifications. The tool aims at providing the user with a summarised report of semantic changes between two versions of a procedure, and focuses on minimising any spurious differences such as, renaming local variables. While the tool provides knowledge of variable dependences within a procedure, it is not very helpful when considering an entire program because the tool does not maintain any relationship between method invocation and method definition.

In [3] a technique for performing a 3 way struc-

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[1] PDStore is a Triplestore database developed at the University of Auckland

tured XML merge is described. The technique involves defining merge rules derived from common use cases of XML editing. While there are similar problems, a few differences exist. By the nature of XML, the local structure is important. However with Java code the structure can vary and still present the same semantic definition. Thus some of the rules made in [3] become invalid for flexible structured data such as code.

[4] describes the problems associated with common textual based merging. It proposes a solution that can be applied to software artefacts of different types. The solution involves representing information with extra information such as namespaces appended with UIDs. Once the data is represented in this special structure, the job of analysing two structures should be made easier.

4 Requirements

A successful execution of the research endeavour should meet the following requirements:

1. To be able to successfully identify simple changes in method body but not necessarily code structure

2. To be able to successfully identify and common sections of code in two structures with slight variations

3. Identify changes in structure, such as method location being shifted

4. Successfully merge two differing versions of code following from the examples in 1 and 2

The following optional requirements would also be attempted to met during the execution of this research endeavour
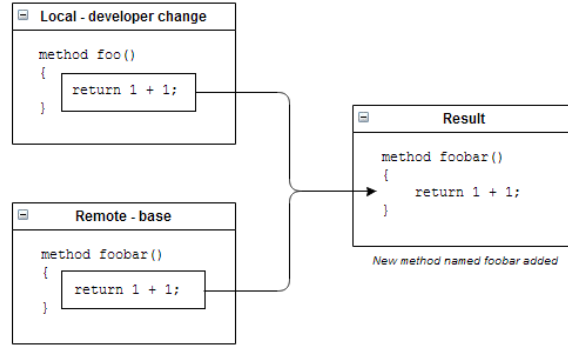

Figure 1: Identification of changes and merged result

1. To integrate this additional functionality into the existing PDStore versioning application.

5 Design and Implementation

The underlying technology used in the proposed method involves using PDStore to be able to form a structured view of the code. The logic for doing the detection and merging will be written in Scala. After defining a method to define "sameness" of a section of the code, we will be using a similar approach to [3] to generate rules that help define merging.

The following describes an example of where our tool successfully merges two documents, identifying the changes with respect to semantic meaning and structure.

Figure 1 shows one possible scenario we intend to solve with our tool. We aim to recognise if a method is carrying out the same procedure as an existing method, at commit. As you can see in the above figure, the tool merges the two methods into one, by keeping the recent name of the method and same code within the method.

6   Evaluation

Paper prototypes will be used to evaluate the feasibility of the User Interface design of our tool. This study will reveal both fundamental and minor flaws in the UI that would need to be fixed before the final milestone. Specific scenarios will be constructed outlining various use cases that will then be run through by the participants on multiple different UI designs. The participants will be asked to think out loud, so that their thought process can be observed and evaluated. Feedback will then be collected from the participants at the end through the use of a questionnaire which will then be used to measure the usefulness of each design.

Any flaws which are identified will then be corrected and the test will then be undertaken again so as to verify that the flaws are indeed fixed.

7   Project Plan

Listed below are three milestones for this project

Milestone One: Successfully identify the type of simple structural changes

This involves defining rules and defining a notion of "sameness" for two code artefacts. The PDStore database will be used to compare the two different versions of the code. Completion criteria involves being able to generate output that clearly identify the changes.
Due Date: 15th April 2014

Milestone Two: Perform merging of simple structural changes

After being able to identify the changes, we need to define appropriate rules for merging.

To complete the milestone, the merger will be required to successfully merge files for a few defined scenarios.
Due Date: 30th April 2014

Milestone Three: Integrate the added functionality to existing PDStore based versioning tool

Integrating the added functionality will allow us to conduct our evaluation on users. This will be key in determining the usefulness and effectiveness of the changes.
Due Date: 12th May 2014

References

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