A New Taxonomy of Software Testing Approaches

Seeking More Standardized Standards

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Goal

The first step to any formal process is **understanding the underlying domain**. Therefore, a systematic and rigorous understanding of software testing approaches is needed to develop formal tools to test software. In our specific case, our motivation was seeing **which kinds of testing can be generated automatically by Drasil**, "a framework for generating all of the software artifacts for (well understood) research software" [1].

Problem

Most software testing ontologies seem to focus on the high-level testing process rather than the testing approaches themselves. For example:

- Tebes et al. (2020) mainly focus on parts of the testing process (e.g., test goal, testable entity)
- Unterkalmsteiner et al. (2014) provide a foundation for classification but not its results

Methodology

Since a taxonomy doesn't already exist, we should create one!

- We started with an ad hoc approach, focusing on textbooks **trusted at McMaster University**
- We then realized that this was too arbitrary, so we started from **more established sources**, such as IEEE and SWEBOK
- The goal of this approach is to iterate, eventually revisiting the original textbooks, until enough knowledge is built up to encounter diminishing returns (ideally no returns!)
- Since there are many standardized documents about software testing (or software in general), **this should be trivial, no?**

In Our Experience

NO.

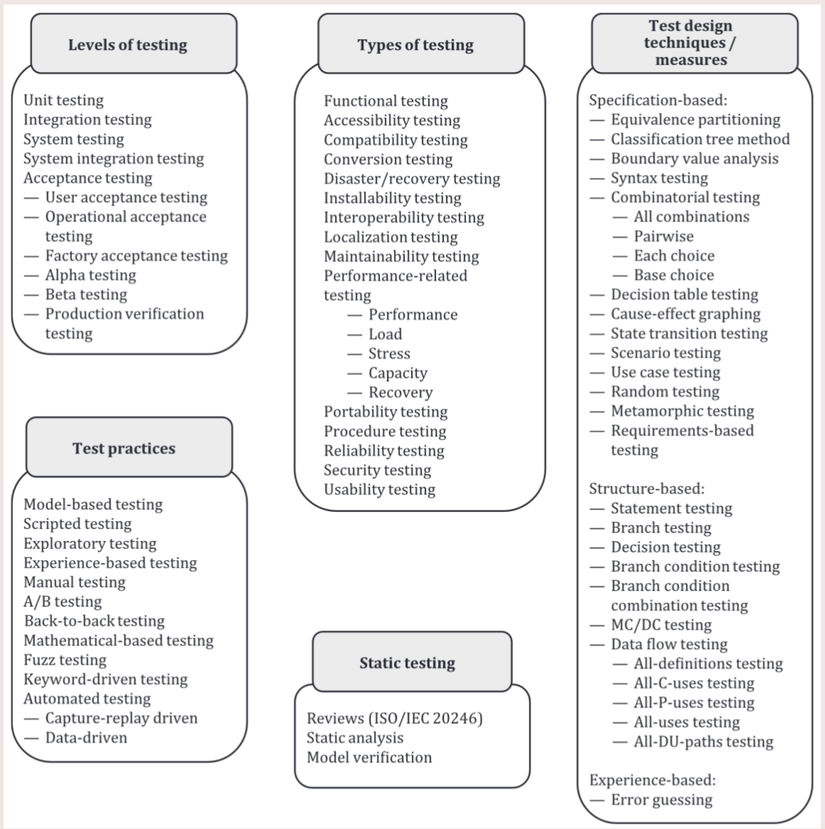

Figure 1: A classification of some "test approach choices" [2, p. 22].

Information often **appears** logical, but this often breaks down. For example, the classification of test approaches in Figure 1 reveals the following ambiguities:

- Experience-based testing is both a test design technique **and** a test practice
- What distinguishes the following pairs is unclear:
  - Disaster/recovery testing and recovery testing
  - Branch condition testing and branch condition combination testing

More Examples

A big contributor to the ambiguities in Figure 1 is the number of definitions that are not given. Despite its source [2] being a standard for general concepts related to software testing, it leaves much unstandardized. For example, as shown in Figure 2, most (55 out of 99) testing approaches mentioned **do not have a definition**! Eight of these were at the very least described in the previous version of this standard [3], and nine were present in the same way in another IEEE standard [4] that would have been available upon publication of this one. However, the presence of a definition does not guarantee that it is useful! See Figure 3 for some good (bad?) examples.

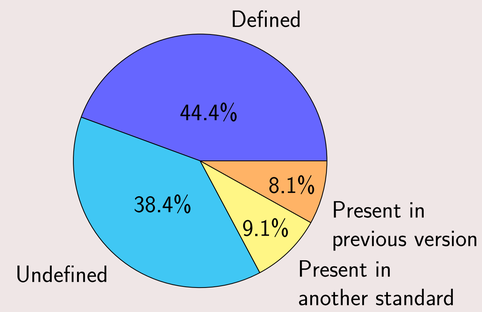

Figure 2: Breakdown of testing approach definitions from [2].

3.3809
software element
1. system element that is software
cf. system element, software/system element

3.1486
event sequence analysis
1. per

3.2697
operable
1. state of

Figure 3: Some less-than-helpful definitions from [4, pp. 421, 170, 301, counterclockwise from top].

This problem also extends to definitions of software testing approaches. For example, SWEBOK V4 says "scalability testing evaluates the capability to use and learn the system and the user documentation. It also focuses on the system's effectiveness in supporting user tasks and the ability to recover from user errors" [5, p. 5-9]. This definition seems to be an amalgamation of the definitions of usability, recovery, and potentially functional testing. What's more, SWEBOK's definition of elasticity testing cites only one source [5, p. 5-9]; **one that doesn't contain the words "elasticity" or "elastic"**!

Even when the general idea behind an approach is understood, discrepancies can still arise. While alpha testing is quite common and understood, there is disagreement on who performs it:

1. "users within the organization developing the software" [4, p. 17],
2. "a small, selected group of potential users" [5, p. 5-8], or
3. "roles outside the development organization" [6]

Conclusions & Future Work

- Current software testing taxonomies are **incomplete, inconsistent, and/or incorrect**
- For one to be useful, it needs to be built systematically from a large body of established sources
- We will continue investigating how the literature defines and categorizes software testing approaches to analyze any discrepancies and structure these ideas coherently
- Hopefully, this leads to a **centralized, consistent taxonomy** that can grow alongside the literature as the field of testing advances

References

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Acknowledgments

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