

Recommending Functions in Spreadsheets from the Fuse Corpus

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Abstract—The most common form of end-user programming software is spreadsheets. Despite spreadsheets having a large array of functions built-in, most of these functions are underused. To address this, we investigate recommender system technology and present a collaborative filtering based function recommender system for spreadsheets. Our evaluation shows that the recommender system performs significantly better in comparison with a most popular algorithm based system. In this paper, we discuss the implementation of the system and the evaluation process. In addition, we outline a road-map to integrate the system as an effective tool in Microsoft Excel.

I. INTRODUCTION

End-user programmers range from children to professionals including teachers, accountants, administrators, managers, and research scientists [1]. While many of these users are not formally trained software developers, the tasks they perform on a frequent basis are quite similar to that of a professional software engineer’s including detecting errors, debugging, and understanding formulas and macros written by others.

Spreadsheets are the most common form of end-user programming software. According to a study in 2005 [2], nearly 23 million Americans use spreadsheets, constituting 30% of the workforce. The use of spreadsheets is also very common in industry for analytical purposes. Winston [3] estimates that around 90% of all analysts in industry perform calculations in spreadsheets. From a spreadsheet user’s perspective, formulas can be viewed as program fragments as formulas can contain programming constructs such as variables, conditional statements, and references to other parts of the spreadsheet. It is important that these end-user programmers using spreadsheet makes efficient use of the functionality available to them [Citation needed].

In Microsoft Excel, there are almost 350 unique functions, (472 in Microsoft Excel 2013 including the compatibility functions¹). But, most of these are rarely used. To facilitate these very large number of spreadsheet analysts to use these functions, it is viable that we explore effective function recommendation in spreadsheets.

Researchers have been assembling and preserving spreadsheet corpora for the purpose of better understanding of end-user activities and designing tools to assist them [4], [5]. In

this paper, we look into Fuse [6], the largest reproducible spreadsheet corpus known to date. We applied a slightly modified version of the collaborative filtering algorithm on the spreadsheets in Fuse to get function recommendations for an input spreadsheet. We evaluated the performance of our system against another commonly used recommender algorithm and found out that our collaborative filtering-based recommendation system recommends functions in spreadsheet by insert future calculated percentage here.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first review previous work on recommendation systems in softwares and related work on making spreadsheet formula usage efficient (Section II). We then provide details of the spreadsheet corpus used for our system and the details of the algorithm used (Section III) before describing our evaluation measures (Section IV) and their outcome (Section V). We discuss the various aspects of our system (Section VI) along with the limitations and future works (Section VII) based on our contribution in this paper afterwards.

II. RELATED WORK

Recommender systems have been applied with success in both academia and industry to provide personalized suggestions and help users cope with overabundance of information [7]–[9]. Recommender systems assist users by determining products and services of interest to the user in a scenario when the number and diversity of options exceeds the user’s decision making capability.

Collaborative filtering is one of the most prominent recommending technologies available. The core concept of collaborative filtering is to apply a nearest neighbor method between a user’s ratings or preferences and the preference of a large user community, and provide the user with recommendations by extrapolating based on how her selection or preference relate to that of the community. Collaborative filtering has been applied to recommend a range of products and services, such as movies [10], news [8], books [11], [12], research papers [13], and school courses [14], [15].

However, there has been little effort to use recommendation systems to help users of a large and complicated software system to learn and explore the functionalities and commands of the system. One of the notable attempts to use recommender systems to recommend command is the OWL [16], which

¹<https://support.office.com/en-us/article/Excel-functions-by-category-5f91f4e9-7b42-46d2-9bd1-63f26a86c0eb>

makes command recommendations to Microsoft Word users. OWL recommends commands to an individual if she is not using certain commands at all but the community is using them on a frequent basis.

Matejka and colleagues developed a collaborative filtering-based approach to recommend commands in AutoCAD, a computer aided drafting software, called Community-Commands [17]. The researchers of CommunityCommand showed that the collaborative filtering derived command recommendations were preferred by the AutoCAD users over the history based recommendation approach used in OWL.

In this paper, we build on these prior works by applying the concept of recommender systems to recommend functions in spreadsheets. We use the Fuse spreadsheet corpus as a source of function usage preference of the spreadsheet users' community and recommend functions contextualized to an individual user by applying collaborative filtering algorithm.

III. METHODOLOGY

According to the formal definition, collaborative filtering is a method of making automatic predictions (filtering) about the interests of a user by collecting preferences or taste information from many users (collaborating) ². Although collaborative filtering can be applied in many ways, most approaches falling under the category of user-based collaborative filtering are composed of mainly two distinct steps - find the users with similar preference patterns to that of the input user and then use the preference of the similar users to obtain predictions for the input user.

To apply this technique, we need to measure the similarity between two users. In order to do so, we define a vector for each user's spreadsheets and compare the vectors to find the similar preferences. Our function vector is defined such that the vector V for an individual user consists of cells, where each cell V_i represents the usage frequency of the function f_i .

To generate the input user's vector we extract function usage frequencies from multiple files created by the user. The more spreadsheets created by the same user is given as input the better representative vector for the user we get. As for the potential pool of similar user vectors, we decided to use Fuse, a spreadsheet corpus containing nearly 250 thousand unique spreadsheets extracted from the Common Crawl³ index [6]. The authors of Fuse also extracted meta information such as created by and function usage frequencies. We classified the spreadsheet meta information and discarded any spreadsheet that did not use any function. This reduced the number of spreadsheets under consideration to less than 13 thousand. These spreadsheets were then grouped by the user name (There are a large number of spreadsheets where this information is not present, how do we refer to them in the paper?). We proceeded to extract the function vector from each of these groups in the similar way the input user vector was extracted.

The final number of function vectors in this pool of potential similar user vectors was insert actual number from modified code here.

To measure the similarity between users, we used the cosine similarity function, which measures the cosine of the angle between the user's vectors as described above. Given the function vector for two users i and j as V_i and V_j respectively, the similarity function is:

$$similarity(i, j) = \cos(\theta_{V_i V_j}) = \frac{V_i \cdot V_j}{||V_i|| ||V_j||}$$

When the similarity function evaluates closer to 0, the vectors are substantially orthogonal to each other, which indicates that the users are dissimilar. A similarity function value of closer to 1, indicates that the vectors are nearly collinear and the users are quite similar. For ease of our implementation we used the complement of the cosine similarity: $1 - similarity(i, j)$, which is often commonly referred to as cosine distance.

To find the similar user vectors for the given vector, we calculate the similarity function value between each of the vector in the pool and the input vector, after this the vectors in the pool are sorted based on their cosine distance in ascending order. We selected n most similar vectors from this ordered list, where n is a tuning parameter, which in our case was between 3 and 5.

We compare the frequencies of each individual function between each of the similar vector and the input vector, and add a function to the recommendation set only if the function had a frequency value in one of the similar vectors but not in the input vector. The set of recommended functions is then ordered by the cumulative frequency of the functions in the similar vectors, this way the functions in the recommendation list appear in order of their usage in the similar vectors.

IV. EVALUATION

V. RESULTS

VI. DISCUSSION

VII. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE WORK

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²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborative_filtering

³<http://www.commoncrawl.org>

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