Module 13

Software Reliability and Quality Management

Lesson 32

Software Reliability Issues

Specific Instructional Objectives

At the end of this lesson the student would be able to:

- Differentiate between a repeatable software development organization and a non-repeatable software development organization.
- What is the relationship between the number of latent errors in a software system and its reliability?
- Identify the main reasons for why software reliability is difficult to measure.
- Explain how the characteristics of hardware reliability and software reliability differ.
- Identify the reliability metrics which can be used to quantify the reliability of software products.
- Identify the different types of failures of software products.
- Explain the reliability growth models of a software product.

Repeatable vs. non-repeatable software development organization

A repeatable software development organization is one in which the software development process is person-independent. In a non-repeatable software development organization, a software development project becomes successful primarily due to the initiative, effort, brilliance, or enthusiasm displayed by certain individuals. Thus, in a non-repeatable software development organization, the chances of successful completion of a software project is to a great extent depends on the team members.

Software reliability

Reliability of a software product essentially denotes its trustworthiness or dependability. Alternatively, reliability of a software product can also be defined as the probability of the product working "correctly" over a given period of time.

It is obvious that a software product having a large number of defects is unreliable. It is also clear that the reliability of a system improves, if the number of defects in it is reduced. However, there is no simple relationship between the observed system reliability and the number of latent defects in the system. For example, removing errors from parts of a software which are rarely executed makes little difference to the perceived reliability of the product. It has been experimentally observed by analyzing the behavior of a large number of programs that 90% of the execution time of a typical program is spent in executing only 10% of the instructions in the program. These most used 10% instructions are often called the core of the program. The rest 90% of the program statements are called non-core and are executed only for 10% of the total execution time. It therefore may not be very surprising to note that removing

60% product defects from the least used parts of a system would typically lead to only 3% improvement to the product reliability. It is clear that the quantity by which the overall reliability of a program improves due to the correction of a single error depends on how frequently is the corresponding instruction executed.

Thus, reliability of a product depends not only on the number of latent errors but also on the exact location of the errors. Apart from this, reliability also depends upon how the product is used, i.e. on its execution profile. If it is selected input data to the system such that only the “correctly” implemented functions are executed, none of the errors will be exposed and the perceived reliability of the product will be high. On the other hand, if the input data is selected such that only those functions which contain errors are invoked, the perceived reliability of the system will be very low.

Reasons for software reliability being difficult to measure

The reasons why software reliability is difficult to measure can be summarized as follows:

- The reliability improvement due to fixing a single bug depends on where the bug is located in the code.

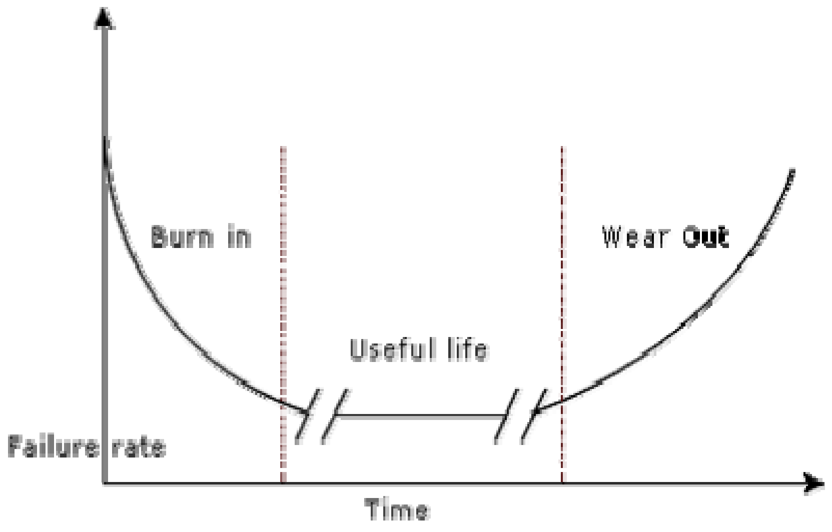
- The perceived reliability of a software product is highly observer-dependent.

- The reliability of a product keeps changing as errors are detected and fixed.

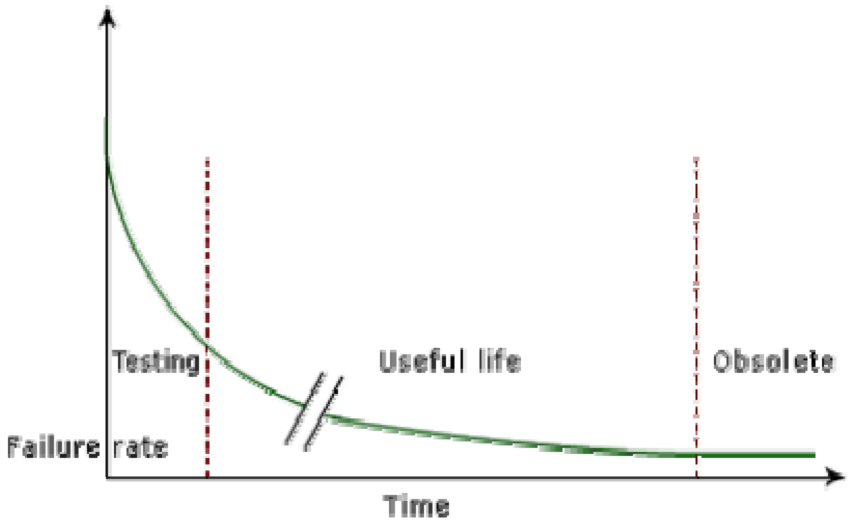
Hardware reliability vs. software reliability differ

Reliability behavior for hardware and software are very different. For example, hardware failures are inherently different from software failures. Most hardware failures are due to component wear and tear. A logic gate may be stuck at 1 or 0, or a resistor might short circuit. To fix hardware faults, one has to either replace or repair the failed part. On the other hand, a software product would continue to fail until the error is tracked down and either the design or the code is changed. For this reason, when a hardware is repaired its reliability is maintained at the level that existed before the failure occurred; whereas when a software failure is repaired, the reliability may either increase or decrease (reliability may decrease if a bug introduces new errors). To put this fact in a different perspective, hardware reliability study is concerned with stability (for example, inter-failure times remain constant). On the other hand, software reliability study aims at reliability growth (i.e. inter-failure times increase).

The change of failure rate over the product lifetime for a typical hardware and a software product are sketched in fig. 13.1. For hardware products, it can be observed that failure rate is high initially but decreases as the faulty components are identified and removed. The system then enters its useful life. After some time (called product life time) the components wear out, and the failure rate increases. This gives the plot of hardware reliability over time its characteristics “bath tub” shape. On the other hand, for software the failure rate is at it’s highest during integration and test. As the system is tested, more and more errors are identified and removed resulting in reduced failure rate. This error removal continues at a slower pace during the useful life of the product. As the software becomes obsolete no error corrections occurs and the failure rate remains unchanged.



(a) Hardware product



(b) Software product

Fig. 13.1: Change in failure rate of a product

Reliability metrics

The reliability requirements for different categories of software products may be different. For this reason, it is necessary that the level of reliability required for a software product should be specified in the SRS (software requirements specification) document. In order to be able to do this, some metrics are needed to quantitatively express the reliability of a software product. A good reliability measure should be observer-dependent, so that different people can agree on the degree of reliability a system has. For example, there are precise techniques for measuring performance, which would result in obtaining the same performance value irrespective of who is carrying out the performance measurement. However, in practice, it is very difficult to formulate a precise reliability measurement technique. The next base case is to have measures that correlate with reliability. There are six reliability metrics which can be used to quantify the reliability of software products.

- **Rate of occurrence of failure (ROCOF).** ROCOF measures the frequency of occurrence of unexpected behavior (i.e. failures). ROCOF measure of a software product can be obtained by observing the behavior of a software product in operation over a specified time interval and then recording the total number of failures occurring during the interval.
- **Mean Time To Failure (MTTF).** MTTF is the average time between two successive failures, observed over a large number of failures. To measure MTTF, we can record the failure data for n failures. Let the failures occur at the time instants t_1, t_2, …, t_n. Then, MTTF can be calculated as $\sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{t_{i+1-}t_i}{(n-1)}$. It is important to note that only run time is considered in the time measurements, i.e. the time for which the system is down to fix the error, the boot time, etc are not taken into account in the time measurements and the clock is stopped at these times.
- **Mean Time To Repair (MTTR).** Once failure occurs, some time is required to fix the error. MTTR measures the average time it takes to track the errors causing the failure and to fix them.
- **Mean Time Between Failure (MTBR).** MTTF and MTTR can be combined to get the MTBR metric: MTBF = MTTF + MTTR. Thus, MTBF of 300 hours indicates that once a failure occurs, the next failure is expected after 300 hours. In this case, time measurements are real time and not the execution time as in MTTF.
- **Probability of Failure on Demand (POFOD).** Unlike the other metrics discussed, this metric does not explicitly involve time measurements. POFOD measures the likelihood of the system failing when a service request is made. For example, a POFOD of 0.001 would mean that 1 out of every 1000 service requests would result in a failure.

- **Availability.** Availability of a system is a measure of how likely shall the system be available for use over a given period of time. This metric not only considers the number of failures occurring during a time interval, but also takes into account the repair time (down time) of a system when a failure occurs. This metric is important for systems such as telecommunication systems, and operating systems, which are supposed to be never down and where repair and restart time are significant and loss of service during that time is important.

Classification of software failures

A possible classification of failures of software products into five different types is as follows:

- **Transient.** Transient failures occur only for certain input values while invoking a function of the system.
- **Permanent.** Permanent failures occur for all input values while invoking a function of the system.
- **Recoverable.** When recoverable failures occur, the system recovers with or without operator intervention.
- **Unrecoverable.** In unrecoverable failures, the system may need to be restarted.
- **Cosmetic.** These classes of failures cause only minor irritations, and do not lead to incorrect results. An example of a cosmetic failure is the case where the mouse button has to be clicked twice instead of once to invoke a given function through the graphical user interface.

Reliability growth models

A reliability growth model is a mathematical model of how software reliability improves as errors are detected and repaired. A reliability growth model can be used to predict when (or if at all) a particular level of reliability is likely to be attained. Thus, reliability growth modeling can be used to determine when to stop testing to attain a given reliability level. Although several different reliability growth models have been proposed, in this text we will discuss only two very simple reliability growth models.

Jelinski and Moranda Model

The simplest reliability growth model is a step function model where it is assumed that the reliability increases by a constant increment each time an error is detected and repaired. Such a model is shown in fig. 13.2. However, this simple model of reliability which implicitly assumes that all errors contribute equally to reliability growth, is highly unrealistic since it is already known that correction of different types of errors contribute differently to reliability growth.

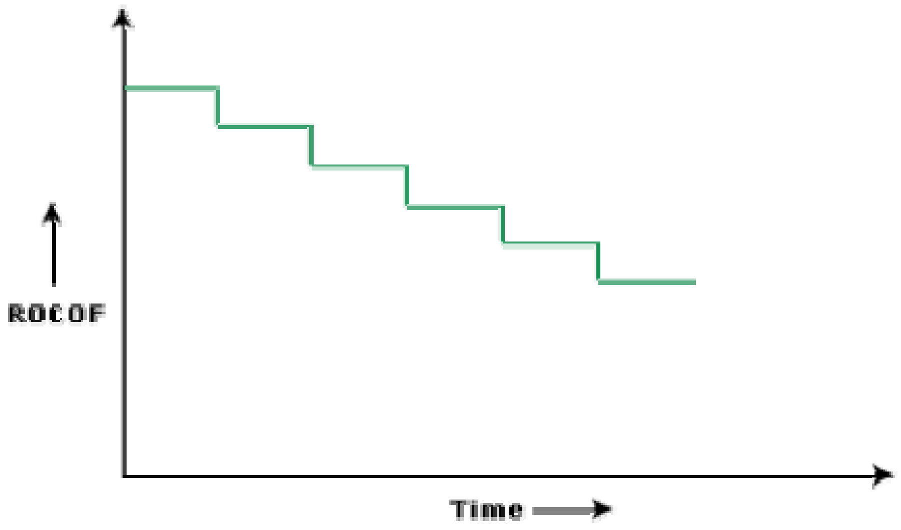


Fig. 13.2: Step function model of reliability growth

Littlewood and Verall's Model

This model allows for negative reliability growth to reflect the fact that when a repair is carried out, it may introduce additional errors. It also models the fact that as errors are repaired, the average improvement in reliability per repair decreases (Fig. 13.3). It treat's an error's contribution to reliability improvement to be an independent random variable having Gamma distribution. This distribution models the fact that error corrections with large contributions to reliability growth are removed first. This represents diminishing return as test continues.

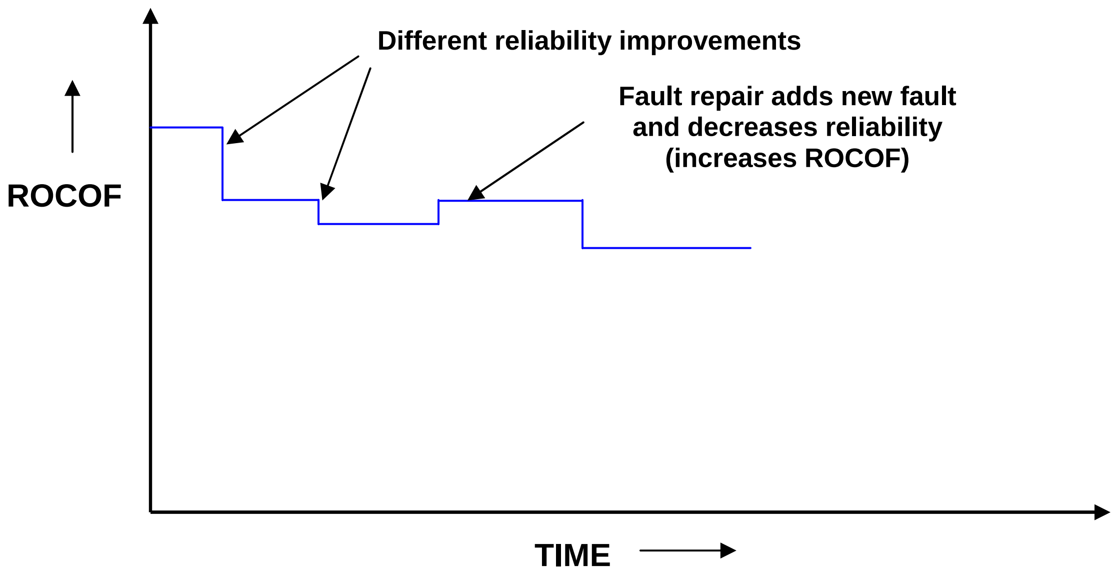


Fig. 13.3: Random-step function model of reliability growth