Empirical Study Comparing Quality Metrics with Code Volatility, and Investigating a Prediction Model

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*Abstract*—Your summary

Keywords—

# Introduction

Give a short description of your study. More importantly, describe the motivation for your study.

How to maintain the quality of software? This question is the source of much debate and organizations spend many resources trying to answer it. Software companies aim for systems with longevity and as part of continuous improvement and feedback, many institution track metrics of these systems. Software metrics are designed to help developers maintain and check the quality of a software system. Some of the virtues of actively tracking metrics are improved risk analysis, cost analysis and planning. However, metrics alone are unable to solve the problem of assessing the quality. According to Olague et al., there should be empirical validation of all the proposed OO metrics to ensure their appropriate use [1]. Ultimately we would like to minimize the cases where a metric is correct from a theoretical standpoint but has limited use in a practical sense.

In our approach we developed six different metrics: four of them based on class level calculation, and two of them based on system level. One metric (LCOM) was given as a starting point, thus overall we validated seven different metrics. In this paper, we introduced the notion of code volatility compared to quality metrics, which seems to be something quite novel. Volatility describes the propensity for a given code fragment to change over different releases. We define volatility as the number of modifications that has been made to a Java class across a set of different releases. A high volatility (HV) class is one which is modified in most of the releases. A medium volatility (MV) is one that has been modified in some of the release, and finally a low volatility (LV) class in one that has been modified only a single time.

We performed a case study on four consecutive version of Apache Ant, a publically available OSS project used for software build management. We used the information contained in the SVN revision history in order to perform our calculations.

The metrics we have chosen for our study are the following: LCOM [2], LCOM-Henderson [3], Cohesion [5], RFC, Lines of Code, MHF and AHF [4]. Details on each metric are available in section III.

We were interested in observing the correlation (if any) between the different metrics and the class volatility. This is interesting since the information may be used by organizations who wish to prioritize refactoring and unit testing activities – code volatility adds another dimension as to risk planning and mitigation.

Furthermore, we used the historical data to build a predictive model to forecast future changes based on current changes. Using Apache Ant versions 1.5 to 1.9 for our study, we have applied association rule mining for generating rules on how classes change together and used these rules to predict which classes will be changed as a result. Association rules are conditional statements that help in finding relationship between random objects in an information repository. Given a large dataset of transactions, the rules can give information on how strongly two objects are related to each other.

While there are different types of association rule mining, we leveraged the Apriori algorithm [6]. It is based on two widely accepted concepts: support and confidence. Support is an indication of how frequently the items appear in the dataset. Confidence indicates the number of times that the consequent appears with the antecedent.

Association rules are widely used to find hidden trends and patterns. For example, Amazon’s suggestions (“people who bought this item also bought…”) is an implementation example of using association rules. Also, in the context of grocery shopping, given a dataset of store transactions, perhaps we can find out: “if a person buys milk then there is a 60% chance that he will buy eggs too.”

Programmers use association rules to build applications capable of machine learning. Machine learning is a type of artificial intelligence that seeks to build programs with the ability to become more efficient without being explicitly programmed. [CITATION NEEDED]

# Related Work

## Code Volatility

It proved difficult to find related works which also consider the correlation between quality metrics and code volatility. However, we mention the following papers which describe pieces similar to which we used in our approach.

Munson and Elbaum looked at comparing the complexity of sequential builds in order to measure the impact of code change regarding fault proneness [7]. They aimed at determining a suitable fault surrogate (which they dubbed code churn), and furthermore established that code churn is associated with measures of program quality. This research has some similar themes compared to our research in that they investigate how churn correlates with quality (faults); however, they don’t delve into the concept of occurrences of churn across multiple releases.

Graves et al. posit that “In general, process measures based on the change history are more useful in predicting fault rates than product metrics of the code: For instance, the number of times code has been changed is a better indication of how many faults it will contain than is its length.” in their work [8]. Here we clearly observe similar themes compared to our proposal of code volatility. Their model considers collections of files as an individual module, compared to our view that individual classes are the core building blocks. One of the arguments they make regarding standard complexity metrics is that they correlate too highly with lines of code: “…numbers of lines of code in modules are not helpful in predicting numbers of future faults once one has taken into account numbers of times modules have been changed.” This work has similar findings to our research, most notably that using the sum of contributions from all changes in a module’s history can effectively predict fault potential. They proceed one step further and also consider a module’s age in the prediction calculation, which is something we did not do.

One other work which looks at code change and quality is Nagappan and Ball’s research [9]. In it they describe two measures (M5 and M6) which take into account "the cumulative time that a file was opened for editing from the VCS". While this isn't exactly our definition of volatility, it does represent something similar. This concept was used to cross-check the other measures described in their research and it is interesting to our paper since it introduces the concept of quantifying volatility, albeit differently (total time open vs. # of changes across different releases).

## Association Rule Mining

A number of previous studies have been done on large OSS projects such as jEdit, Eclipse, Apache Ant, and Mozilla Firefox to detect the coupling between different java files, classes and methods in order to build prediction models. Ying et al. developed an approach which is based on association rule mining to find recommendations on potential file changes [10]. For example if a developer changes a particular file, then her approach will recommend the other files that will need to be changed. Their findings were superior to ours mostly due to a richer set of data and by omitting confidence.

Similarly, Zimmermann et al. developed a tool named ROSE that works on association rule mining of CVS [11]. Their main concern was to find finer-grained entities, which was absent in Ying’s work. They used association rule mining with minimum support and confidence. Their tool seems to be powerful in terms of suggesting and predicting the next likely code elements to change. It also prohibits and warns about incomplete changes. We took inspiration from both these works and built association rules in a similar fashion. We found that we were able to perform some predictions on future change; however, again their results were superior to ours for various reasons such as richer data set, and using a weighted set of rules (top 10).

# Metrics

## Metrics Definition

Our study involves seven well defined and well known metrics. A full definition of each one can be found in [2], [3], [4], and [5]. A summary is listed below.

1. Metrics analyzed

| Metric | Metric Description |
| --- | --- |
| LCOM (C&K) | Lack of Cohesion. Two methods are cohesive if they access at least one common instance variable. |
| LCOM (Henderson) | Lack of Cohesion for a class. Measures how well a class uses its own attributes. The value is normalized compared to the C&K definition. |
| Cohesion (Briand) | Cohesion of a class. Measures how much a class depends on its own data, normalized to the product of the number of methods and the number of attributes. |
| RFC (C&K) | Response for a class. Measures the cardinality of the number of methods within a class, along with the possible methods of other classes which may be called. |
| Size | Number of statements |
| MHF (MOOD) | Method hiding factor. The ratio of hidden methods compared to all methods for a given system. |
| AHF (MOOD) | Attribute hiding factor. Same as MHF, but looks at attributes instead of methods. |

## Metrics Implementation details

Most metrics above were calculated in a self-contained way. However, in order to calculate size, we needed to adjust the JDeodorant framework. Here we added an abstract method “count()” to the AbstractStatement class, and then leveraged the composite design pattern to have both subclasses (StatementObject, and CompositeStatementObject) implement this method appropriately. More details into our implementation are provided in the section “Experiment Design and Data Collected” below.

# Empirical Study

Given that quality metrics have been shown as a viable assessment of the defects found in a software system, we wish to determine if code volatility is correlated with a set of chosen class and system quality metrics. Furthermore, after determining a set of association rules for four versions of Apache Ant, we wish to determine how well these rules are able to predict changes in the fifth version.

## Examined variables

[ASK NIKOLAOS?] Describe your independent and dependent variables.

## Examined hypotheses

**Code volatility hypothesis**: Classes which are deemed HV exhibit lower quality metrics compared to classes deemed LV. (Null hypothesis: Classes which are deemed HV have the same or better quality metrics compared to classes deemed LV).

**Association rule hypothesis**: Based on association rules and historical data, we can predict which classes may also change in the current/future version. (Null Hypothesis: association rules determined from historical data do not predict the classes which change in the current/future version).

## Experiment design and Data Collection

List the projects you have selected for the analysis. Justify your selection. Describe their characteristics (size, history, version, revisions, development team, development practices, etc.)

Being an OSS project, the SVN commit history for Apache Ant was readily available. Apache Ant is suitable for this analysis because it is widely used in the industry, is sufficiently large in terms of code and contributors, and the historical data well formatted. The commit log contains 149,034 lines and 12,958 commits in total. The first and last commit took place on January 13, 2000 and January 27, 2014 respectively. For our analysis, we considered five releases, and the dates of release are shown in the following table.

1. Apache Ant Releases

| Version # | Release Date |
| --- | --- |
| 1.5 | July 10, 2002 |
| 1.6 | December 18, 2003 |
| 1.7 | December 19, 2006 |
| 1.8 | February 8, 2010 |
| 1.9 | March 7, 2013 |

The SVN log is well structured, following an identical pattern for each commit and therefore from this history we were able to extract the relevant parts of each commit: revision ID, committer, date, path to modified file(s), and comment. We leveraged the date of the commit to associate to which version of Apache Ant a particular commit belongs.

The first four releases were used for analysis and the last one was used for validation. To facilitate the information retrieval we developed a Java project[[1]](#footnote-1) aptly named LogParser which takes care of parsing, cleaning and filtering. During this process, we found that some of the commits were problematic in the sense that they were not related to actual code evolution but were instead performed for infrastructure, legal and cleanup reasons:

* changed the license/copyright (*r637939, r439418, r276065, r276010*)
* removed the authors from code (*r276208*)
* cleanup imports / whitespaces (*r273169, r276017*)

Naturally, these commits were removed from our analysis since they typically modified all classes in the system, and inappropriately skewed the volatility results. As per our definition of volatility, we were only interested in commits which modified at least one Java class. We therefore also filtered out the changes to non-Java code (xml, html, etc.) and only considered classes which were modified (not added or removed).

In order to gather the data for our volatility buckets, we collected the information between one version to another and stored the unique set of classes impacted. The following table depicts the result of that analysis.

1. Number of Commits and Impacted Classes

| Version # | Number of Commits | Set of Java Classes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 15\_to\_16 | 434 | 788 |
| 16\_to\_17 | 630 | 1089 |
| 17\_to\_18 | 296 | 565 |
| 18\_to\_19 | 101 | 519 |

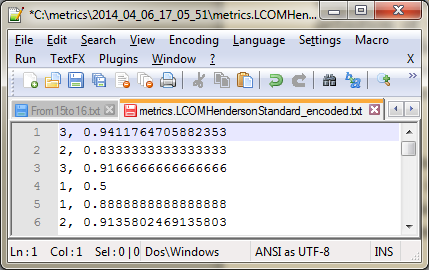
From the three first collections of data, our aim was to match the modified classes into each of the three buckets: High Volatility (HV), Medium Volatility (MV) and Low Volatility (LV) (THIS MIGHT ALREADY BE THERE FROM THE INTRO). The HV bucket contains the classes which got changed in all three times, the MV buckets contains the classes which got changed two times in any of the collections, and the LV buckets contains the classes which got changed only once in any of the collections.

Since the target of our study was to compare the quality metrics between each bucket, we designed LogParser to create three output files: the set of the classes (including the path) in each volatility bucket. There were 294, 503, and 554 classes classified as HV, MV, and LV respectively.

The quality metrics chosen for comparison were a combination of class metrics (LCOM, LCOM Henderson, Cohesion, RFC, and LOC), as well as two system level metrics (MHF, and AHF). We adopted these well-defined metrics from the Chidamber and Kemerer suite, and MOOD respectively.

In order to develop the code which calculates these metrics, we leveraged JDeodorant, a well-designed and flexible framework which runs as an Eclipse plugin. [CITATION NEEDED] JDeodorant hides the complexity of obtaining the meta-model of the system under investigation (AST), and has a rich set of accessor methods in order to interrogate the system at any level.

In order to interact with the JDeodorant framework, we designed each metric as a separate class in the metrics package. We decided on a common usage pattern: each class would write its metric value to a map of “class name: metric value”. The design revealed that all the metric classes exhibited some common behavior so we designed an abstract parent class to take care of common tasks such as loading the volatility buckets and writing the results a separate, timestamped file. The abstract parent defined a template so that each child class would need to only implement one method, and write to the map defined in the parent. The abstract parent loaded the output of LogParser, and we therefore generated output files which contained the metric values for each class in each bucket. Here’s an example output for LCOM Henderson:



The output file was a comma separated list where the first element indicated the volatility (1 is low, 2 is medium, and 3 is high), and the second value is the calculated metric. This format made it easy to import this data into R in order to visualize the boxplots.

Furthermore, LogParser was used to generate the output files which were used to calculate the association rules. We created a separate file for each collection (15\_to\_16, 16\_to\_17, 17\_to\_18, 18\_to\_19). The format for that output was as follows:

* RevisionID1, Java File 1, Java File 2[, .. , Java File n]
* RevisionID2, Java File 1, Java File 2[, .. , Java File n]
* …

Each line represented a single “transaction” (commit), and we only included lines where 2 or more Java classes were modified. The last file was used for validation.

Finally, in order to calculate the correlations between our metrics, we additionally designed some classes to store a summary of all metrics collected for each class. These classes are named “SummaryMetric” and “SummaryMetricCollector”.

1. Table Type Styles

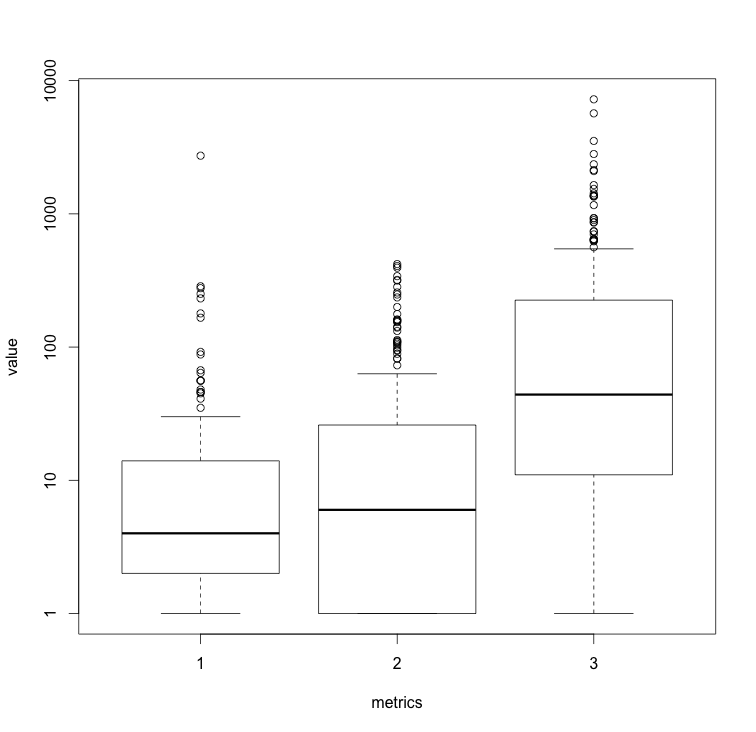
| Table Head | Table Column Head | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table column subhead | Subhead | Subhead |
| copy | More table copya |  |  |

1. Sample of a Table footnote. (*Table footnote*)

## Statistical analysis

Statistical tests. Discussion of the results.

LCOM Boxplot:



## Threats to validity

Internal, External, Construct validity.

# Conclusions

We concluded that...

##### References

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1. The code is available in the team Github repository: [↑](#footnote-ref-1)