An Evolution Model for Software Modularity Assessment

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Abstract

The value of software design modularity largely lies in the ability to accommodate potential changes. Each modularization technique, such as aspect-oriented programming and object-oriented design patterns, provides one way to let some part of a system change independently of all other parts. A modularization technique benefits a design if the potential changes to the design can be well encapsulated by the technique. In general, questions in software evolution, such as which modularization technique is better and whether it is worthwhile to refactor, should be evaluated against potential changes. In this paper, we present a decision-tree-based framework to generally assess design modularization in terms of its changeability. In this framework, we formalize design evolution questions as decision problems, model software designs and potential changes using augmented constraint networks (ACNs), and represent design modular structure before and after envisioned changes using design structure matrices (DSMs) derived from ACNs. We formalize change impacts using an evolution vector to precisely capture well-known informal design principles. As a preliminary evaluation, we use this model to compare the aspect-oriented and object-oriented observer pattern in terms of their ability to accommodate envisioned changes. The results confirm previous published results, but in formal and quantitative ways.

1. Introduction

People have long recognized that evolvability, achieved most fundamentally by appropriate modularity in design, can have enormous technical, organizational and ultimately economic value. However, as a discipline, we still lack the basic science needed to analyze fundamental design decisions such as whether it is worthwhile to refactor existing system, or how to best accommodate envisioned changes.

Modern modularization techniques are emerging to cope with the challenges of developing a well-modularized software system, such as aspect-oriented software development, feature-oriented programming, object-oriented design patterns, and service-oriented architecture. However, each modularization technique provides one way to let some part of a system change independently of all other parts and a modularization technique benefits a design only when the potential changes to the design can be well encapsulated by the technique [17, 20, 11]. In general, software modularization techniques should be evaluated against potential changes.

In this paper, we present a decision-tree-based framework to generally assess design modularization in terms of its changeability. Analyzing design modularity in general requires a design modeling technique independent of particular modularity techniques and language paradigms. We have developed a framework to formally model software designs using augmented constraint networks (ACNs) [5, 4], in which design dimensions and environment conditions are uniformly modeled as variables, possible choices as values of variables, and the relations among decisions as logical constraints. The ACN modeling formalizes the key notions of Baldwin and Clark's design rule theory and Parnas's information hiding criteria [2, 17, 4]. The supporting prototype tool, Simon, supports basic design impact analysis and the automatic derivation of *design structure matrices* (DSMs) [5, 6, 4].

In our evolution framework, we first use ACNs to formally model both software designs and potential changes, and represent design modular structure using DSMs automatically derived from ACNs. Second, we formalize design evolution questions as decision problems, modeling the decision making procedure as a *design tree* (DT). Each node of a DT models a evolution decision, such as the choices of design patterns, a refactoring mechanism, or a potential change. Each decision is associated with an ACN modeling the design resulting from the decision. Finally, the user can compare design modular structure before and after envi-

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sioned changes using design structure matrices (DSMs) and ACNs. We formalize the comparison using a *evolution vector* to precisely capture well-known informal design principles, such as maximizing cohesion, minimize coupling, open to extension, close to modification.

People have been analyzing design evolvability and changeability in qualitative, intuitive, and heuristic ways. For example, Hannemann and Kiczales used a well known and widely-used Figure Editor (FE) [12, 11, 9] to compare the evolvability and modularity property of using aspect-oriented (AO) versus object-oriented (OO) paradigm to implement design patterns. They show the actual code implementing these choices as the evidence of their analysis. However, designers frequently face questions of the like before coding. As preliminary case study, we model the comparison of AO observer pattern vs. OO observer pattern using our evolution model against potential changes metioned in their paper. We show that (1) our framework is expressive enough to capture representative design decisions, such as the choices of a design pattern, or the choice of pattern implementation paradigm (AO or OO); (2) our framework is general enough to account for the OO and AO modularity in uniform, declarative terms; and (3) our framework automates Hannemann and Kiczales's evolvability and modularity analysis precisely.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 uses the figure editor example to illustrate how to generally represent software designs using ACN and DSM models, independent of modularization techniques and language paradigms. Section 3 presents our evolution model and preliminary results. Section 4 discusses related work. Section 5 concludes.

2. Design Representations

In this section, we use a Figure Editor (FE) example [13, 11] to illustrate how to use design structure matrices (DSMs) and augmented constraint networks (ACNs) to generally model software designs and potential changes, which provides the foundation for our changeability analysis framework. The Figure Editor is a tool for editing drawings comprising points and lines (figure elements), where a screen displays each figure element, always reflecting the figure elements' current states.

2.1 Design Structure Matrices

Design Structure Matrix (DSM) modeling originated with the work of Steward dating to the 1960s [18], and has been further developed and applied in the design, analysis and management of many large-scale engineering systems by Eppinger [8] and others. DSMs are the primary representations at the heart of Baldwin and Clark's developing theory of the economics of modularity [2]. Sullivan et al. [19, 20] and Lopes [15] have previously used Baldwin and Clark's *net option value* analysis to quantitatively compare software designs modeled by DSMs.

DSMs present in a graphical form the pair-wise dependence structure of designs. The upper left DSM shown in Figure 2 models the figure editor design using object-oriented observer pattern (generated by Simon). The rows and columns of a DSM are labeled with design variables, representing dimensions for which the designers must make design decisions. A marked cell indicates that the decision of the dimension on the row depends on the decision of the dimension on the column. The cell in row 6, column 1, indicates that how the *Point* should be designed depends on the notification policy in use.

DSM modeling is capable to represent a wide range of design decisions, to model *dominance relations*, a key property of Baldwin and Clark's notion of design rule, by asymmetric dependencies, and to represent multiple modularization methods by reordering the columns and rows of a matrix. Given these advantages, Sullivan et al. [19] showed that Baldwin and Clark's DSM can be extended with environment parameters, and thus precisely account for Parnas's information hiding criterion.

However, DSM modeling does not appear to be expressive enough to support precise design analysis or a rigorously formal theory of coupling in design. First, we have found that building such design models manually is error-prone and time-consuming. Our recent work [5] has shown errors in published DSMs. Many of the errors are due to the difficulty of seeing transitive relations among dependencies; or to the lack of any precise definition of dependence. Second, a DSM only represents design dimensions, but not concrete choices within each dimension nor the semantics of the constraints that relate decisions across dimensions. For example, Gamma et al. [9] mentioned that possible choices for the *notification policy* could be either *push* or *pull*, each having different consequences. DSMs do not explicitly express these choices, nor do they support the analysis of their consequences. Third, there are usually multiple ways to accommodate a change, but a DSM model does not reveal them, and the exact meaning of a mark becomes ambiguous.

2.2 Augmented Constraint Network

To address these problems, our recent work [5] presents the Augmented Constraint Network (ACN) as a formal design representation better subject to automated analysis of the design evolvability and economic-related properties. A DSM can be automatically generated from an ACN. As a result, our ACN modeling has the advantages of DSM modeling and overcomes the shortcomings. The core of an ACN is

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```
1: spec_notify_policy:{push,pull};
2: spec_update_policy:{orig,other};
3: mapping_ds:{hash,other};
4: color_policy_observing:{orig,other};
5: adt_observer:{orig,other};
6: adt_subject:{orig,other};
7: point:{orig,other};
8: line:{orig,other};
9: screen:{orig,other};
10: line = orig => adt_subject = orig &&
  color_policy_observing = orig;
11: screen = orig => adt_observer = orig;
12: screen = orig => spec_update_policy = orig;
13: adt_subject = orig => mapping_ds = hash &&
  adt_observer = orig &&
  spec_notify_policy = push;
14: point = orig => adt_subject = orig &&
  color_policy_observing = orig;
```

Figure 1. The FE Constraint Network

a finite-domain *constraint network* (CNs) [16], which consists of a set of *design variables* modeling design dimension or relevant environmental condition, and a set of logical constraints modeling the relations among them. Each *design variable* has a domain that comprises a set of *values*, each representing a decision or condition. For example, we can model the *notification_policy* as the following scalar design variables: *spec_notify_policy*(*push*,*pull*).

A design decision or environmental condition is represented by a binding of a *value* from a *domain* to a variable. We model dependencies among decisions as logical constraints. Figure 1 shows an ACN modeling object-oriented observer pattern. Line 13 indicates that the current *adt_subject* design is based on the assumption that a hash table is used as the data structure (*mapping_ds*) , the `Observer` interface is as originally agreed (*adt_observer*), and the push model is used as the notification policy (*spec_notify_policy*). We use *orig* (short for original) to generally represent a currently selected design decision in a given dimension, and use *other* as a value to represent unelaborated possibilities.

Hannemann and Kiczales [12] mentioned several changes of the observer pattern, for example, what if the client requires the `Screen` to be both a subject and an observer? We can model such a change as a constraint too. Making `Screen` both a subject and an observer just requires the *screen* extends the abstract subject interface, and respect color observing policy, such as invoking notification function whenever the color changed:

```
screen = orig => adt_subject = orig &&
    color_policy_observing = orig;
```

We augment a CN with a pair-wise relation to model the *dominance* relations among design decisions. For example, agreed interfaces often dominate subsequent implementations. Another instance is that environment conditions are usually out of the designer's control. For example, `(subject, spec_notify_policy)` is a member of the *dominance* relation, modeling that the decision on notification policy is dominating. Another augmentation is a *clustering* relation on variables to model the fact that a design can be modularized in different ways.

From an ACN, we can derive a non-deterministic automaton, which we call a *design automaton* (DA), to explicitly represent the change dynamics within a design space [5, 6, 4]. A DA captures all of the possible ways in which any change to any decision in any state of a design can be compensated for by minimal perturbation, that is, changes to minimal subsets of other decisions, enabling basic *design impact analysis* (DIA) that have fully automated and quantified Parnas's changeability analysis [5, 4].

From a DA, we can also derive a *pair-wise dependence relation* (PWDR). We define two design variables to be *pair-wise dependent* if, for some design state, there is some change to the first variable for which the second must change in at least one of the minimal compensating state changes. From a derived PWDR and a selected clustering method of the ACN, a DSM can be automatically generated by our tool, Simon. As a result, we can in principle apply all the analysis capabilities developed for DSMs to our much more complete and precise models.

Although the *design impact analysis* is sufficient to analyze the impact of changes in design decisions within a single ACN, but is not adequate to analyze the impact of design decisions that have structural effects, or the decisions that introduce new design dimensions, such as the decision to refactor the existing system into a new design pattern. In the next subsection, we model such design decisions using a decision-tree based evolution model to generally assess design modularity and evolvability.

3 Software Evolution Model

Hannemann and Kiczales [12] mentioned several possible changes in FE observer pattern design, and compared the AO observer pattern with the OO observer pattern in terms of their ability to accommodate these changes. In this section, we first illustrate how to formalize their analysis as a decision problem modeled by a decision tree, and then formalize the evolvability assessment using *evolution vectors*.

3.1 Decision Tree Modeling

Hannemann and Kiczales's analysis focused on answering the following changeability questions: (1) what are the

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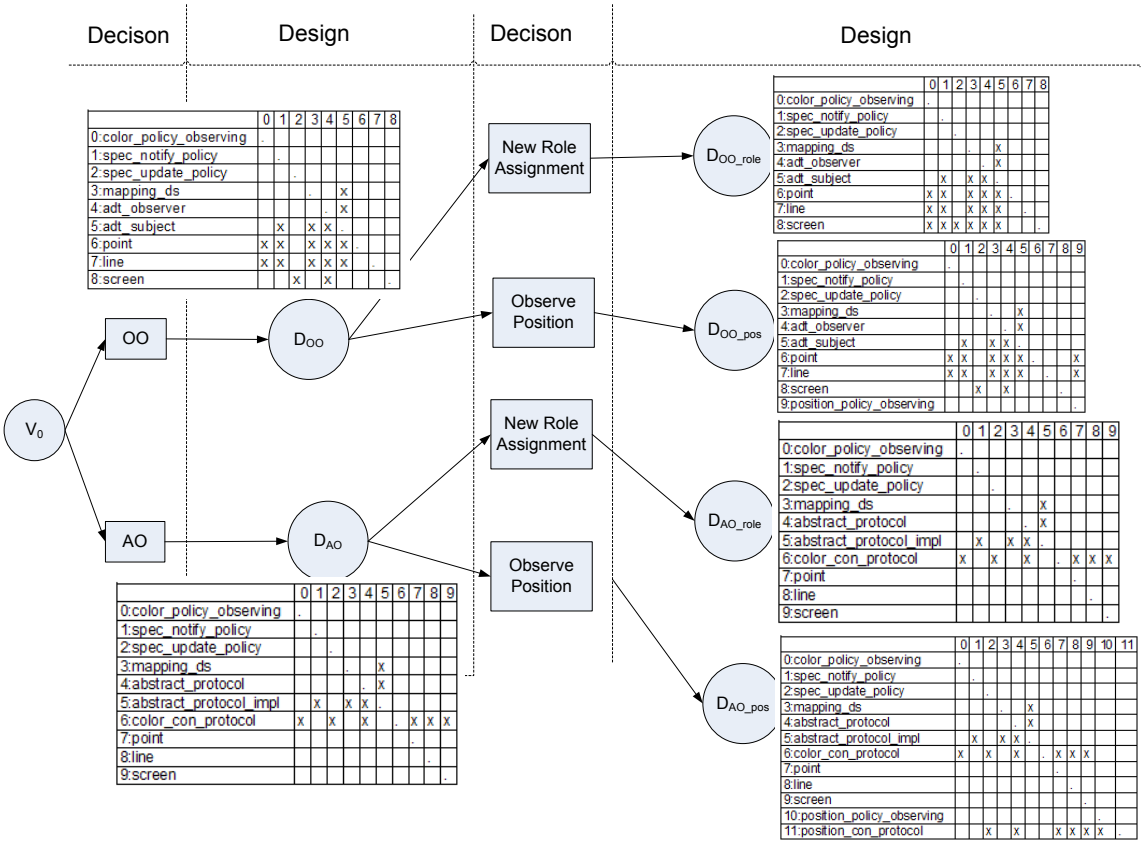

Figure 2. Software Evolution Model

consequences if the client changes the *role assignment*, requiring the `Screen` to be both a subject and an observer? (2) In the original design, the color of subject figure elements is the only state of interest that needs to be observed. What if the positions of the figure elements also need to be observed?

We formulate their analysis as decision problems modeled by a decision tree shown in Figure 2. The node V_0 is the starting point. Square nodes represent design decisions, and round nodes represent the resulting design of a given decision. For example, square node *AO* represents the decision to use AO paradigm. Node D_{AO} represents the corresponding AO design.

Figure 2 models a decision-making procedure: we first represent the choice of using AO or OO paradigm as two decisions leading to two designs, D_{AO} and D_{OO}. After that, we model the envisioned two changes, the new *role assignment* and the additional *position observing*, as subsequent decisions, leading to four possible designs, $D_{OO\_role}, D_{OO\_pos}, D_{AO\_role}$, and D_{AO_pos}. We model all six designs using ACNs and derive their DSMs associating each design node. For example, the D_{OO} DSM is derived from the ACN in Figure 1.

To decide which paradigm can better accommodate envisioned changes, we just need to compare the differences between the designs with and without these changes. To facilitate the comparison, we first formalize the differences between two designs using an *evolution vector* to capture several well-known but informal design principles.

3.2 Evolution Vector

We define the differences of two designs, D and D', as an *evolution vector*:
$\Delta(D' - D) = \langle \Delta couples, \Delta modifications, \Delta size \rangle$,
which consists of the following dimensions, each capturing an informal design principle:

- $\Delta couples$ models the changes in the size of the pairwise dependence relations derived from the corresponding ACNs, assessing design coupling structure variation. Minimizing coupling is an important but informal design principle. A negative $\Delta couples$ indicates decreased coupling among design decisions.

- $\Delta modifications$ models the number of existing design decisions that have to be revisited because of the

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change, reflecting another principle of design evolution: *close to modification and open to extension* [9]. A good design should accommodate new features through extension, and avoid changing existing part that has been debugged and proved to be correct.

- $\Delta size$ models changes in the size of the design space. Larger size implies increased complexity. Using object-oriented techniques incorrectly could cause class explosion, another direction of design evolution the designer should pay attention to.

We have shown that the ACN and DSM modeling can precisely capture Parnas's information hiding criteria, against with each design can be evaluated [19, 5, 6, 4]. We have also shown that using the design impact analysis function of Simon, we can analyze the respective consequences of changing common design decisions for two design alternatives, such as the different impact of changing the notification policy from `push` to `pull` in AO and OO designs respectively. Simon shows that in the OO design, three variables have to be revisited, while in the AO design, only one variable should be revisited. Counting the number of variables affected by a change in a decision is clearly insufficient to determine costs of change, but identifying what must change is a critical step.

The information hiding and design impact analysis supported by Simon currently works within a single ACN model. By contrast, the evolution vector reflects structural changes between two designs, and the vector summarizes the results of performing design impact analysis within each design respectively. In addition, the evolution vector is extensible. For example, we could add a new dimension, Δnov, to calculate Baldwin and Clark's *net option value* (NOV) based on DSM modeling. Estimating parameters of NOV formula is out of the scope of this paper, and we only consider evolution vectors with the above three dimensions.

3.3 Preliminary Results

Given the decision tree model and the evolution vector, we can now quantitatively assess the OO vs. AO observer pattern modularity against the envisioned changes:

(1) *What is the difference of using AO vs. OO to design an observer pattern?* To analyze this problem, we need to compute $\Delta(D_{AO} - D_{OO})$. D_{OO} has 9 variables, D_{AO} has 10 variables, and $\Delta size = 1$. D_{OO} has 17 coupling pairs, D_{AO} has 11 pairs, and $\Delta couples = -6$. Since we are not modeling how to change an OO design to an AO design, the $\Delta modificaiton$ is not applicable. As a result, we get: $\Delta(D_{AO} - D_{OO}) = \langle \Delta couples = -6, N/A, \Delta size = 1 \rangle$, showing that the AO design lowers the number of coupling pairs but slightly increases the complexity.

From the DSMs associated with D_{AO} and D_{OO}, we observe that the decisions on the notification and update policies no longer influence concrete subjects, *Point* and *Line*. Instead, only the abstract and concrete protocols depend on these policies, indicating the localization of crosscutting decisions.

(2) *What is the impact of changing the* role assignment *so that the* Screen *is both a subject and an observer?* To analyze this problem, we first compute the change impacts on the OO design: $\Delta(D_{OO\_role} - D_{OO}) = \langle \Delta couples = 5, \Delta modifications = 1, \Delta size = 0 \rangle$, meaning that the level of coupling increases. We then analyze the change impact on the AO design: $\Delta(D_{AO\_role} - D_{AO}) = \langle \Delta couples = 0, \Delta modificaitons = 1, \Delta size = 0 \rangle$, which indicates that the coupling structure remains unchanged after accommodating this new feature. From the DSMs, we can also observe that the D_{AO_role} DSM is exactly the same as the DSM of D_{AO}, which means that the AO design localizes this change completely without incurring any additional dependencies or new dimensions. The result shows that the AO paradigm has obvious advantages over the OO paradigm in terms of accommodating this particular change.

(3) *What if the* observing policy *changed so that the positions of the figure elements should also be observed in addition to the colors?* To analyze this problem, we first compute the change impacts on the OO design: $\Delta(D_{OO\_pos} - D_{OO}) = \langle \Delta couples = 2, \Delta modifications = 2, \Delta size = 1 \rangle$. Then we compute the change impact on the AO design: $\Delta(D_{AO\_pos} - D_{AO}) = \langle \Delta couples = 6, \Delta modifications = 0, \Delta size = 2 \rangle$. We observe that although the AO design incurs more dependences to accommodate this change, the existing system is not affected because the $\Delta modification = 0$. It indicates that the design can be extended to accommodate this particular change. On the other hand, we need one more variable `position_concrete_protocol` to model the new aspect handling position observation, slightly increasing design complexity.

At this point, if there are additional possible changes, we can extend the decision tree for further analysis. For example, if more figure elements are going to be added as subjects, such as circles and triangles, the AO paradigm will be better since it can localize the task of observing color and position changes. On the other hand, if the figure elements are fixed, but the number of states that need to be observed keeps increasing, using AO design requires adding more aspects for each observable dimension, which will increase the complexity of the whole design.

In summary, using the decision tree model and evolution vectors, we have quantitatively captured Hannemann and Kiczales's qualitative analysis, revealing how these high-level design decisions impact the design coupling structure visually and precisely.

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4 Related Work

Software design space, feature modeling and variability modeling in product family modeling has been widely studied. Feature modeling supports automatic program variations, which have also been widely studied in Batory's work on generic programming [3], Goguen's work on parameterized programming [10] and Czarnecki's work on generative programming [7]. Different from their work, our purpose is to rigorously support modularity analysis and decision-making. Our approach is more general in that we not only model and analyze features, which are one kind of design decisions, but also broader decisions such as refactoring options, design patterns, and aspects. We aim to analyze the design modular structures and their implications, while they aim to analyze feature properties.

Similar to our design space modeling, Lane [14] models the structure of software systems as design spaces by identifying the key functional choices, and classifying the alternatives available for each choice. Their notions of rules, similar to our constraints, are formulated to relate choices within a design space. Our approach is more general in that we model broader decision-making phenomena and their impacts, such as a decision to choose a design pattern or a modularization technique. Traditional impact analysis research focuses on change issues at program level, as summarized in [1], while our approach works at abstract design level.

5. Conclusion

In order to assess software modularity uniformly against its ability to accommodate changes, we presented a decision-tree-based assessment framework to facilitate design changeability analysis. In this framework, we model software designs and potential changes uniformly using augmented constraint networks, independent of language paradigm and modularization techniques. We model design modular structure using derived design structure matrices, and define *evolution vectors* to quantitatively reflect a number of informal design principles. We analyzed the object-oriented observer pattern versus aspect-oriented observer pattern in terms of their ability to accommodate envisioned changes. The result shows that our model quantitatively and formally verified previously informal analysis results. The evolution vector has the potential to be extended with additional dimensions, such as net option values, having the potential to bridge the gap between software design modeling and rigorous economic analysis.

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