Software Risk Management through Independent Verification and Validation

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Abstract

Software project managers need tools to estimate and track project goals in a continuous fashion before, during, and after development of a system. In addition, they need an ability to compare the current project status with past project profiles to validate management intuition, identify problems, and then direct appropriate resources to the sources of problems. This paper describes a measurement-based approach to calculating the risk inherent in meeting project goals that leverages past project metrics and existing estimation and tracking models. We introduce the IV&V Goal/Questions/Metrics model, explain its use in the software development life cycle, and describe our attempts to validate the model through the reverse engineering of existing projects.

1 Introduction

Managers of large, complex software projects often rely on independent contractors to verify and validate (V&V) the computer software produced by a separate development contractor. An independent V&V (IV&V) contractor helps identify, manage, and reduce the potential risk of failures to meet intended requirements in a software project at all phases of development. While some level of risk will always remain in a project, risk can be reduced if errors and other discrepancies are found as early as possible in the software development life cycle. Many studies have shown that undetected errors in a project will increase the likelihood of failures in later life cycle phases when the cost to fix them increases by orders of magnitude.

IV&V efforts are highly effective in early life cycle phases [1] if they can successfully predict the likelihood of problems based on an analysis of the current state of a project. It is difficult, however, to make such predictions with provable accuracy and show correlation between development activities and problems that arise in later life cycle phases. Formal software development models can provide some insight based on quantified analysis of past software development efforts [2,3]. While such formal models are imperfect guides to future efforts, they are far more likely to predict problems than informal methods.

We have developed an approach called the IV&V Goal/Question/Metric method (IGQM) that allows IV&V managers to monitor the level of risk in a software development project. Using IGQM, managers can use past projects as "yardsticks" against which to measure present projects. They can also assess the potential impact of their decisions about resource allocations, schedules, costs, and tradeoffs.

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Figure 1: The Goal/Question/Metric (GQM) model

during execution of the development effort. The
IGQM method provides *continuous* reporting of
the status of a project in terms of what areas are
at risk of failure. The method represents a
formal interface between the IV&V contractor,
the software development contractor, and the
customer. It summarizes the analysis work
performed by the IV&V contractor in terms of
what project goals are at risk of failure and
allows managers to make informed decisions
about why problems are occurring.

This paper discusses the IGQM model and its
use in an automated support environment [4].
Unlike existing metric-based models, our
approach does not emphasize any specific set of
metrics or functions for assessing risk. The
model allows for use of other assessment
models. The IGQM model is used to collect and
summarize the metrics and relate them directly
to project goals. Although our approach to
IV&V relies on metrics from past projects as
designs, the model can be "primed" with
informal estimates or external project databases.
Results from pilot projects are then used as
feedback to provide continuous improvement to
the model itself in order to improve our
predictive accuracy.

The IGQM model can incorporate several
existing software estimation and tracking
methods. These include the COCOMO method
cost, size, and effort. We describe our attempts
to validate our approach by using these methods
to reverse engineering past projects to determine
if identifying risk sources early in the life cycle
could have helped prevent later problems.

The IGQM model is embedded in an automated
support environment for software IV&V [4] that
allows continuous analysis of a project's status.
IV&V is viewed as a complementary process to
the software development process [5] and it is
responsible for continuous assessment of the
development process. As a software
development process progresses, events are
triggered in the IV&V process. The IV&V team
must analyze changes in the development
process and publish its findings to the customer
in the form of an IV&V report. This report is
generated using the IGQM method by a tool that
is integrated into a CASE environment. The
reporting tool collects and summarizes analysis
results (i.e., metrics) from other IV&V CASE
tools in an incremental fashion. When a change
occurs in the development process, the project
measurements and risk are updated
incrementally like values and formulas in a
spreadsheet. The risk impact of each change is
assessed immediately relative to the project
goals. This paper does not discuss the details of
the automated support environment, but focuses
on the IGQM model around which the
environment is organized.

2 Approach

The IGQM approach to software IV&V focuses
on the quantification, identification,
management, and reduction of risk in software
development projects based on objective metrics
taken during the software development life
cycle. Metrics include process measures (i.e.,
whether or not a particular procedure been
performed at this phase) as well as artifact
measures (i.e., quantitative measurements of
documents, code, tests, and other products).
The IGQM tool formally defines the impact of
such measures on the failure or success in
meeting project goals.

Our approach is based on the Goal-Question-
Metric (GQM) model [6] augmented with risk
analysis [7]. The GQM model depicted in
Figure 1 allows managers to explicitly describe a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Confidences Q1</th>
<th>Confidences Q2</th>
<th>Confidences Q3</th>
<th>Confidences Q4</th>
<th>Certainty</th>
<th>Uncertainty</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.55</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.90</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
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<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.10</td>
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</table>

Table 1: Computing goal risks based on question confidence probabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
<th>M4</th>
<th>Confidences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>88</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Q3</td>
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<td>88</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Computing question confidence probabilities based on project metrics

We have augmented the GQM model to compute the risk of failure in a project to satisfy the intended goals. The risk of failing to satisfy the goal is defined as the uncertainty of reaching that goal multiplied by the importance of that goal. Table 1 shows a list of goals, their importances, certainty, uncertainty, and risks for an example project. The goals G1, ..., G4 might be

- Low cost
- Medium effort
- Use of prototyping
- High reliability

The questions related to each goal in the IGQM model will determine exactly what is meant by each goal. The risk values associated with each goal should change during the software development life cycle. If we keep track of the risk at each step in the development process, we can identify high-risk goals and ensure that the overall risk is non-increasing over time, i.e., while risk may increase at any step, the overall risk trend is decreasing.

2.1 Risk associated with each goal

To calculate the risk associated with each goal, the importance of the goal is specified explicitly by the manager, but its certainty is computed from answers to related questions in the GQM model. For each goal-questions group, we employ a set of certainty functions $G$ at each step of the development life cycle defined as

$$g_{i,t} = G_{i,t}(Q_{x,t}, Q_{y,t}, \ldots)$$

where $g_{i,t} \in [0 \ldots 1]$ for the $i^{th}$ goal at the process step $t$ and each $Q_{x,t}$ is the probabilistic confidence answering question $x$ as true at process step $t$. Thus, the certainty of satisfying each goal changes at each step in the software development process. The certainty
functions may be based on the baselines of past projects or on the results of simulated models. In either case, the results of certainty functions are added to the baseline for use in future projects.

2.2 Confidence in answers to questions

Here is where existing estimation and tracking methods fit into the IGQM model. Each question can be answered true with a characteristic probability called its confidence. A false answer has a confidence value of zero. The confidence of answering a question is determined by a unique function based on collected project metrics. For each question-metrics group, we employ a set of confidence functions $Q$ defined as

$$q_{x, t_p} = Q_{x, t_p}(M_{a, t_c, s_c}, M_{b, t_c, s_c}, \ldots)$$

where $q_{x, t_p} \in [0..1]$ for question $x$ at the process step $t_p$ where each $M_{a, t_c, s_c}$ is a metric $a$ at step $t_c$ provided by source $s_c$. Table 2 shows a question and its related metrics from which a confidence function is defined. All metric values are the same relative to each question, but the confidence functions are defined uniquely for each question and process step. Metrics that are unknown at process steps can still be used because the lack of knowledge contributes to the risk calculation. Unknown measure decrease confidence in answering questions and in turn decreases the certainty of satisfying a goal.

3 Predictive Functions

The characteristic certainty and confidence functions associated with goals and questions can be based on many existing methods that have evolved from experiences on large numbers of actual projects. The IGQM model simply tries to relate the calculation of risk to the analysis these methods provide in order to help identify areas of a project that need attention and allow managers to trace problems to their sources.

For example, several methods exist for estimating the eventual number of source lines of code (SLOC) in a project [3]. Early estimates of SLOC will be very inaccurate, but we can assess the probability of the correctness of our estimate. Consider the goal of "Small Program" in which the related questions are:

1. Are there less than 100 requirements?
2. Are there less than 50 function points?
3. Are there less than 50 modules?
4. Are there less than 10,000 SLOC?

In this example, question 4 might given the most weight in ultimately determining the acceptance criteria. However, in the early stages of a project, we can only answer question 1 with a large degree of confidence, but the answer to this question will not have a large impact of increasing the certainty of meeting the goal.
according to our weighting. Figure 2 shows a risk profile for the different questions at this stage of development. The relatively higher slopes of the other questions illustrates a greater degree of uncertainty.

The weighting of each question confidence measure in determining goal certainty will change during the lifetime of the project, i.e., the slopes will decrease and different measures will play larger roles. Eventually, confidence functions may get better with more experience and a broader database of actual projects. This will also decrease the uncertainty.

Estimating functions are highly domain dependent. This is why it is important for each organization to institute measurement programs to improve the effectiveness of their predictions. The IGQM model can be primed with hand-picked estimate or those from external projects, but these initial estimates will be highly inaccurate. Only with time can an organization build confidence in their predictive models. Of course, changes in personnel and the need to tackle new projects can invalidate previous experience, but

In the case of SLOC, we can determine the probability of the eventual number of lines of code exceeding our estimate. Likewise, many methods exist for cost, size, error, and effort estimation. Whereas many of these techniques are only used early in a project to construct a proposal or plan, our approach allows managers to track actual measurements and compare them with estimates. As a project evolves, a manager can gain greater confidence in the estimates as they change dynamically based on actual performance.

4 Discussion

In Table 1, we can see that goal G1 is the only goal with significant associated risk. If the confidence and certainty functions are based on methods that leverage past project data, the risk associated with G1 at this process step might say something like "44% of the projects at this step with a similar goal-questions profile failed to successfully satisfy this goal at time of delivery." The interpretation is based on the characteristic confidence and certainty functions related to each goal and question respectively.

Creating the certainty and confidence functions is not easy. They are based on profiles of past projects, contain coefficients that are specific to each environment or project, and must be primed initially with estimates or data from external projects. By mapping our approach to current software development and V&V practices, we "reverse" engineered these estimates from informal measures on past projects. Even though some information was not available on these projects, they were adequate enough to provide working estimates. In one case we wanted to verify the intuition of V&V personnel who noted problems with the delivery schedule of project milestones. In their expert opinion, the schedule was too short. Our model, based on existing methods such as COCOMO, confirmed that the intuition was correct.

In the next sections, we show how traditional V&V activities can be mapped to our model. Specifically, we relate process management and testing to see how they contribute to project measurements and at what stages of the life cycle. Based on this mapping, we can assess the relative effectiveness of these traditional approaches in controlling software projects. Process management, for example, ensures that the software development team follows all process steps (e.g., DOD 2167A) and follows up on all discrepancy reports and anomalies. It monitors that the proper artifacts (i.e., documents and code) are produced on time and in their proper order. Testing, on the other hand, is usually associated with code level validation of the end-product system in a simulated environment. While it is widely believed that both of these approaches help reduce project risk, they have serious limitations in many projects, especially in large, complex systems with volatile requirements. It is possible that expensive and catastrophic errors may go undetected using traditional approaches. We show that according to our reverse engineered projects, late life cycle testing may find some errors but it is often too late to fix them. This fact shows up not as an increase in risk towards the end of the project, but as an inability of existing techniques to keep the risk trend non-increasing and within nominal limits.
Process management and testing alone are inadequate means to manage risk in large, complex projects.

4.1 Process

First, an IV&V team can check to make sure the software development process is followed at all steps. The goal of this task is to reduce risk by ensuring that a process is followed that increases the probability of success. The reasoning behind this task is informal: if a past task was successful using a process then each step must be repeated to guarantee success in other projects.

We can cast current software development practices into the IGQM risk model by asking specific questions about process steps accomplished. The metrics are Boolean values that help answer questions at each step regarding whether or not a procedure has been performed. In this fashion, the IGQM approach subsumes these current "checklist" methods and provides a metrics-based environment for formally validating whether or not generic assumptions about process effectiveness are true. Process tracking by the IV&V team is necessary but insufficient to ensure risk reduction in the development project.

4.2 Testing

Software testing has been a major focus of IV&V efforts, but testing is expensive and has severe limitations. Traditional testing cannot find many problems or finds problems too late in the software development life cycle where they are too costly to fix. In the IGQM model, the results of tests can be viewed as metrics (e.g., pass-fail). From this metrics-based perspective, early analysis of requirements and design can also be viewed as "tests" but the test results are viewed with less confidence than concrete tests at later stages of the development life cycle. In addition, the tests can be directly associated with requirements or project goals in the IGQM model. In this case, the existence of a test is important for traceability. We used this approach to model traditional testing in the IGQM model and showed that late testing reduces risk, but that the risk trend is already too high at later phases for testing to have any significant effect.

Traditional testing does not permit early detection of problems and it is often impossible to exercise a system with a battery of tests that completely characterize the operational environment. If major problems occur, it is often too late and expensive to fix them. As a result, the software might experience traumatic failure, the project is scrapped, must be redone, or the customer is left dissatisfied with a partially functional system. If the customer had access to effective, predictive estimate earlier in the development process, expectations might be more realistic and the intentions better defined with the development team.

5 Implementation

We have implemented the IGQM model in a tool for use by IV&V practitioners. The tool, called ADMIT (A Distributed Metrics Integration Tool), is implemented in Tk/Tcl under the X Windows system and the UNIX operating system. The tool primarily consists of three list boxes of goals, questions, and metrics and a multi-graph widget that shows the cumulative risk for the project, per goal, question confidences, and metric values.

Metrics come from many sources in the distributed environment. Some come from shared files and databases (e.g., the Network File System (NFS), Oracle). When the files change, the tool reads the file, updates the measure, and recalculates the associated confidence and certainty functions. Metric may also be source directly from CASE tools using remote procedure call in which the ADMIT tool acts as the server. We are continuing to evolve our implementation as we integrate other sources of metrics and techniques for collecting them.

6 Summary

Our approach depends on an intense metrics collection and archival capability to provide high levels of confidence in IV&V predictions. It also depends on the continuous evolution of the predictive certainty and confidence functions. While our approach does not eliminate risk from a project, it does formalize the risk identification, management, and reduction. It makes risk management the
explicit objective of the IV&V process in order to deliver effective results to the customer. Moreover, the confidence of predictions can be increased as our baseline grows with each project. For well-defined application domains, we expect this approach will have most value based on extrapolating experiences with the IGQM model in practice.

While a statistical risk model of IV&V does not guarantee success, it represents a significant improvement over existing practices that deliver dubious value to the IV&V customer and may unknowingly harm software development efforts with needless paperwork. During the course of our research, we continue to investigate (1) effective process models; (2) specific and useful metrics and their correlation within the process; and (3) continuous improvement of certainty and confidence functions associated with the process.

7 References


8 Biographies

John R. Callahan is an assistant professor of computer science in the Department of Statistics and Computer Science at West Virginia University and a research faculty member at the Concurrent Engineering Research Center (CERC) in Morgantown, West Virginia. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Maryland College Park in 1993 in software engineering and is currently working on research in independent verification and validation of computer software. He has worked for Xerox Corporation of Tysons Corner, Virginia and Palo Alto, California as well as NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and the Department of Defense. Dr. Callahan serves as the NASA Research Associate at the NASA IV&V Facility in Fairmont, West Virginia. The Fairmont facility houses IV&V contract work for the Mission To Planet Earth and Space Station projects.

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