Bug Isolation via Remote Program Sampling [*]

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ABSTRACT

We propose a low-overhead sampling infrastructure for gathering information from the executions experienced by a program's user community. Several example applications illustrate ways to use sampled instrumentation to isolate bugs. Assertion-dense code can be transformed to share the cost of assertions among many users. Lacking assertions, broad guesses can be made about predicates that predict program errors and a process of elimination used to whittle these down to the true bug. Finally, even for non-deterministic bugs such as memory corruption, statistical modeling based on logistic regression allows us to identify program behaviors that are strongly correlated with failure and are therefore likely places to look for the error.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.5 [**Software Engineering**]: Testing and Debugging—*distributed debugging*; G.3 [**Mathematics of Computing**]: Probability and Statistics—*correlation and regression analysis*; I.5.2 [**Pattern Recognition**]: Design Methodology—*feature evaluation and selection*

General Terms

Experimentation, Performance, Reliability

Keywords

bug isolation, random sampling, assertions, feature selection, statistical debugging, logistic regression

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an unfortunate fact that essentially all deployed software systems have bugs, and that users often encounter these bugs. The resources (measured in time, money, or people) available for improving software are always limited, and the normal case is that through sheer numbers the user community brings far more resources to bear on testing a piece of software than the team responsible for producing that software.

This paper is about making lemonade from lemons. Given that deployed software has problems, perhaps we can speed up the process of identifying and eliminating those problems by learning something from the enormous number of executions performed by the software's user community. We propose an infrastructure where some information about each user execution of a program is transmitted to a central database. The data gathered from all executions is analyzed to extract information that helps engineers find and fix problems more quickly; we call this *automatic bug isolation.* In our view, such an infrastructure has several benefits:

- For deployed software systems, the number of executions in actual use dwarfs the number of executions produced in testing by orders of magnitude. For many software systems today, essentially all of the information from user executions is discarded, because there is no mechanism for feedback. Retaining even a small portion of that information could be valuable.

- Gathering information from all, or at least a representative sample, of user executions gives an accurate picture of how the software is actually used, allowing better decisions about how to spend scarce resources on modifications. In particular, bugs that affect a large number of users are a higher priority than bugs that are very rare. This kind of information is almost impossible to obtain from anywhere other than actual user executions.

- While our primary interest is in finding and fixing quality problems, information gathered from user executions could be useful for other purposes. For exam-

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ple, software authors may simply wish to know which features are most commonly used, or we may be interested in discovering whether code not covered by in-house testing is ever executed in practice, etc.

- Traditional user feedback about problems often consists of a call from a relatively unsophisticated user to a perhaps only somewhat more sophisticated technical support center. In a networked world, it is simply more efficient and accurate to gather this information automatically.

- Many bugs sit on open bug lists of products for an extended period of time before an engineer is available to work on the bug. Automatically gathering data from user executions allows for automated analysis without human intervention. Thus, when an engineer is finally available to work on a problem, the results of automated analyses done in the interim may help the engineer to identify and fix even relatively simple problems more quickly.

The idea of gathering data from actual user executions is not new. Commercial databases, for example, routinely produce extensive log files, and the first action when a user reports a problem is to inspect those logs. Similarly, each flight of the Boeing 777 generates logs that are subsequently combed for signs of possible problems [14]. There are many other similar examples in the world of commercial software.

A more recent development is the result of ubiquitous Internet connectivity. Netscape/Mozilla, Microsoft, GNOME, and KDE have all deployed automated, opt-in crash reporting systems. These systems gather key information about program state after a failure has occurred: stack trace, register contents, and the like. By sending this information back to the development organization, the user community helps developers effectively triage bugs that cause crashes and focus on the problems experienced by the most users.

We believe crash reporting is progress in the right direction, but we also believe that existing approaches only scratch the surface of what is possible when developers and users are connected by a network. For example, the crash-reporting systems do not gather any information about what happened before the crash. Trace information leading up to the failure may contain critical clues to the actual problem. Also, crash reporting systems report no information for successful runs, which makes it difficult to distinguish anomalous (crash-causing) behavior from innocuous behavior common to all executions. In general, the information gathered by crash-reporting systems is not very systematic, and in all feedback systems of which we are aware (crash-reporting or otherwise) the subsequent data analysis is highly manual.

We present one approach to systematically gathering information about program runs from a large, distributed user community and performing subsequent automatic analysis of that information to help in isolating bugs. Initially, we believed that the interesting problem was the analysis of the data, and that gathering the data was relatively straightforward. However, we discovered that designing a data gathering infrastructure that would scale is non-trivial. As a result, this paper is as much about the design and implementation of the system that gathers the data from user executions (Section 2) as it is about the subsequent data analysis (Section 3).

Our infrastructure is designed to gather information about a large number of program executions taking place remotely from a central site where data is collected. Any such design must solve two problems.

The first problem is that the method for gathering information must have only a modest impact on the performance of the user's program. Our approach, discussed in Section 2, is based on sampling. Classical sampling for measuring program performance searches for the "elephant in the haystack": it is looking for the biggest consumers of time. In contrast, we are looking for needles (bugs) that may occur very rarely, and furthermore our sampling rates may be very low to maintain client performance. This leads us to be concerned with guaranteeing that the sampling is statistically fair, so that we can rely on the reported frequencies of rare events. We also develop new ways to reduce the overhead of the necessary additional code that determines whether to take a sample or not.

The second problem is that information from the client must be transmitted over the network to a central database. Gathering even a relatively small amount of data periodically from a large number of clients creates significant scalability problems. We have found it necessary to discard information about the order in which program statements execute to achieve sufficiently compact representations of sampled data (Section 2.5).

Section 3 presents three applications of increasing sophistication:

- We show how to share the cost of program assertions over a large user base through sampling. Each user only executes a fraction of the assertions, and thus sees good performance, but in the aggregate bugs due to assertion failures are still extremely likely to be detected (Section 3.1).

- We show how to isolate *deterministic bugs* without the benefit of explicit assertions. A bug is deterministic with respect to a predicate P if whenever P is true, the program is guaranteed to crash at some future point. An initially large set of predicates hypothesized to capture the cause of the crash is gradually reduced over time as sampled executions reveal which predicates predict program failure (Section 3.2).

- We generalize our approach to the isolation of *non-deterministic bugs*. A bug is non-deterministic with respect to a set of program predicates if it is not deterministic for any predicate in the set (i.e., none of the considered predicates perfectly predicts program crashes). We use statistical regression techniques to identify predicates that are highly correlated with program failure (Section 3.3).

Finally, monitoring of user executions raises privacy and security concerns. The problems are both social and technical; a discussion of these issues appears in Section 5.

2. SAMPLING FRAMEWORK

This section describes our sampling framework. We begin with sampling of basic blocks and gradually add features until we can describe how to perform sampling for entire programs. Suppose we start with the following C code:

```
{
    check(p != NULL);
    p = p->next;

    check(i < max);
    total += sizes[i];
}
```

Our sampling framework can be configured to sample arbitrary pieces of code, which may be either portions of the original program or instrumentation predicates added separately. For this particular example, assume that the italicized *check()* calls have been tagged for sampling. A *check()* call might conditionally halt the program (as with `assert()`), or it might append an event to a trace stream, or it might update a per-predicate counter to record how often the predicate is true. The precise behavior of the instrumentation code is of no concern to the sampling transformation itself.

2.1 Sampling the Bernoulli Way

Suppose that we wish to sample one hundredth of these checks. Maintaining a global counter modulo one hundred is simple, but has the disadvantage of being trivially periodic. If the above fragment were in a loop, for example, one of the checks would execute on every fiftieth iteration while the other would never execute. We wish sampling to be fair and uniformly random: each check should independently have a 1/100 chance of being sampled each time it occurs. This is a so-called *Bernoulli process*, the most common example of which is repeatedly tossing a coin. We wish to sample based on the outcome of tossing a coin that is biased to come up heads only one time in a hundred.

A naïve approach would be to use a simple random number generator. Suppose `rnd(`n`)` yields a random integer uniformly distributed between 0 and $n - 1$. Then the following code gives us fair random sampling at the desired density:

```
{
    if(rnd(100) == 0) check(p != NULL);
    p = p->next;

    if(rnd(100) == 0) check(i < max);
    total += sizes[i];
}
```

This strategy has some practical problems. Random number generation is not free: tossing the coin may be slower than simply doing the check unconditionally. Furthermore, what was previously straight-line code is now dense with branches and joins, which may impede other optimizations.

Sampling is sparse. Each of the conditionals has a $99/100 = 99\%$ chance of not sampling. On any run through this block, there is a $(99/100)^2 \approx 98\%$ chance that both instrumentation sites are skipped. If we determine, upon reaching the top of a basic block, that no site in that block is sampled, then we can branch into fast-path code with all conditionally-guarded checks removed. This requires two versions of the code: one with sampled instrumentation, one without. It also requires that we can predict how many future sampling opportunities are skipped before the next one is taken.

Anticipating future samples requires a change in randomization strategy. Consider a sequence of biased coin tosses, with "0" indicating no sample and "1" indicating that a sample is to be taken. Temporarily increasing the sampling density to 1/5, we might have:

$$\langle \underbrace{0,0,0,0,0,1}_{6}, \underbrace{0,0,0,1}_{4}, \underbrace{0,1}_{2}, \underbrace{0,0,1}_{3}, \ldots \rangle$$

An equivalent representation counts the number of tosses until (and including) the next sampled check: $\langle 6, 4, 2, 3, \ldots \rangle$. This representation is predictive: the head of the sequence can be treated as a countdown, telling us how far away the next sample is. If we are at the top of a basic block containing only two checks, and the next sampling countdown is 6, we know in advance that neither of those sites is sampled on this visit. Instead, we merely discard two tosses and proceed directly to the instrumentation-free fast path:

```
{
    if(countdown > 2) {
        /* fast path:  no sample ahead */
        countdown -= 2;
        p = p->next;
        total += sizes[i];
    } else {
        /* slow path:  sample is imminent */
        if(countdown-- == 0) {
            check(p != NULL);
            countdown = getNextCountdown();
        }
        p = p->next;

        if(countdown-- == 0) {
            check(i < max);
            countdown = getNextCountdown();
        }
        total += sizes[i];
    }
}
```

The instrumented code does extra work to manage the next-sample countdown, but the fast path is much improved. The only overhead is a single compare/branch and a constant decrement, and this overhead is amortized over the entire block. In larger blocks with more instrumentation sites, the initial countdown check has a larger threshold, but that one check suffices to predict a larger number of skipped sampling opportunities.

Consider the distribution of countdown values. With a sampling density of 1/100, there is a 1/100 chance that we sample at the very next opportunity. There is a $(99/100) \times (1/100)$ that the next chance is skipped but that the one after that is taken. A countdown of three appears on a $(99/100)^2 \times (1/100)$ chance, and so on. These numbers form a *geometric distribution* whose mean value is the inverse of the sampling density (that is, 100). Numbers in a geometric distribution characterize the expected inter-arrival times of a Bernoulli process. However, repeated tossing of a biased coin is not necessary: geometrically distributed random numbers can be generated directly using a standard uniform random generator and some simple floating-point operations. (In theory, a countdown may need to be arbitrarily large. However, the odds of a 1/100 countdown exceeding $2^{32} - 1$ are less than one in 10^{10^7}.)

As can be seen in the instrumented slow path, the countdown is reset once it reaches zero. Thus, we consume next-sample countdowns gradually over time. However, the rate of consumption is slower than that for raw coin tosses: n countdowns for $1/d$ sampling encode, on average, nd tosses. A bank of pre-generated random countdowns, then, is quite reasonable and will exhaust or repeat d times more slowly than would a similar bank of raw coin tosses.

2.2 From Blocks to Functions

The scheme for blocks outlined above generalizes to an arbitrary control flow graph as follows. Any region of acyclic code has a finite number of possible paths. Let the maximum number of instrumented sites on any path be the region's *weight*. A countdown threshold check can be placed at the top of each acyclic region. If the next-sample countdown exceeds the weight of an acyclic region r on entry to r, then no samples are taken on that execution of r.

Any cycle in a control-flow graph without instrumentation is weightless and may be disregarded. Any cycle with instrumentation must also contain a threshold check, which guarantees that if we start at any threshold check and execute forward, we cross only a finite number of instrumentation sites before reaching the next threshold check. Thus, we can compute a finite weight for each threshold check.

There is some flexibility regarding exactly where a threshold check is placed, but computing an optimal solution is NP-hard [18]. For simplicity, our present system places one threshold check at function entry and one along each loop back edge. Weights may be computed in a single bottom-up traversal of each function's control flow graph. If any threshold check is found to have zero weight, it is simply discarded.

We produce two complete copies of the function body. One contains full instrumentation, with each possible sample guarded by a decrement and test of the next-sample countdown. The other copy, the fast path, merely decrements the countdown where appropriate, but otherwise has all instrumentation removed. We stitch the two variants together at threshold check points: at the top of each acyclic region, we decide whether a sample is imminent. If it is, we branch into the instrumented code. If the next sample is far off, we continue in the fast path code instead.

Figure 1 shows an example of code layout for a function containing one conditional and one loop. Dotted nodes represent instrumentation sites; these are reduced to countdown decrements in the fast path. The boxed nodes represent threshold checks; we have added one at function entry and one along the back edge of the loop. This code layout strategy is a variation on that used by Arnold and Ryder to reduce the cost of code instrumented for performance profiling [2]. The principal change in our transformation is the use of geometrically distributed countdowns in conjunction with acyclic region weights to choose between the two code variants. Arnold and Ryder use fixed sampling periods (e.g., exactly once per n opportunities, or exactly once per n instructions) and do not apply region-specific weighting. Our approach imposes more overhead, but offers greater statistical rigor in the resultant sampled data. Arnold and Ryder have studied several variations with different trade-offs of code size versus overhead; the same choices apply here.

2.3 Function Calls

New optimization opportunities arise in the presence of function calls. A conservative treatment assumes any function call changes the countdown arbitrarily. Therefore, a new threshold check must appear immediately after each function call. This treatment is appropriate if, e.g., the callee is being compiled separately.

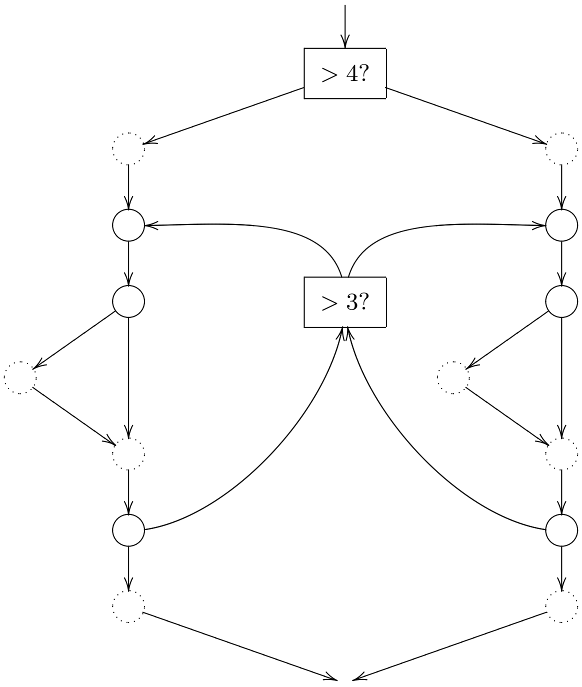

Figure 1: Example of instrumented code layout

However, if the callee is known and available for examination, a simple interprocedural analysis can be used. A *weightless function* has the following properties:

- The function contains no instrumentation sites.
- The function only calls other weightless functions.

The set of weightless functions can be computed via a standard iterative algorithm.

For purposes of identifying acyclic regions and placing threshold checks, calls to weightless functions are invisible. Acyclic regions can extend below such calls, and no additional threshold check is required after such a call returns. A further benefit is that the bodies of weightless functions may be compiled with no modifications. They have no threshold checks, no instrumented code, and therefore require no cloning or transformation of any kind.

2.4 Global Countdown Management

Our initial experience suggests that having the next-site countdown in a global variable can be expensive. Our system is implemented as a source-to-source transformation for C, with `gcc` as our native compiler. We find that `gcc` treats the many "`countdown--`" decrements along the fast path quite poorly. It will not, for example, coalesce a sequence of five such decrements into a single "`countdown -= 5`" adjustment. This apparently stems from conservative assumptions about aliasing of global variables.

Efficient countdown management requires that the native C compiler take greater liberties when optimizing these decrements. We assist the native compiler by maintaining the countdown in a local variable within each function:

1. At function entry, *import* the current global countdown into a local variable.
2. Use this local copy for all decrements, threshold checks, and sampling decisions.
3. Just before function exit, *export* this local copy back out to the global.

To maintain agreement across all functions, we must also export just before each function call and import again after each call returns. Again, though, calls to weightless functions may simply be ignored, as they do not change or even inspect the countdown. Similarly, the bodies of weightless functions need not import and export at entry and exit, since they always leave the countdown unchanged. With this change, the conventional native C compiler can coalesce decrements and perform other standard but important optimizations.

2.5 Issues in Remote Sampling

Our framework for statistically fair sampling can be used for any program monitoring application. As discussed in Section 1, there are issues peculiar to monitoring a large number of remote sites. Here we briefly discuss the main problems and a particular solution that we adopt.

Remote monitoring can harm performance in several ways. As usual the performance penalty imposed by the extra monitoring code is a concern, but so are the use of local storage to hold results (even temporarily) on a user's machine, the use of network bandwidth to transmit results, and finally the storage needed to hold results on a central server for analysis. For example, if we wish to retain all sampled data, then the storage requirements for the central server grow linearly with the number of executions even if the data collected from each execution is constant size.

Our approach is to sample the number of observations of each of a very large, but fixed, set of predicates (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3). The final form of the data is a vector of integers, with position i containing the number of times we observed that the ith predicate was true. For example, a typical entry might be that the predicate $x > y$ at a particular program point was observed to be true 42 times in one execution.

Maintaining a vector of counters produces data for an execution whose size is largely independent of the sampling density or running time. The loss of information, however, is significant, as the order of the observations is discarded. While our results can be interpreted as showing that one can go a long way ignoring ordering, we expect there are interesting applications that require ordering information. We leave the problem of determining how to efficiently gather, store and analyze partial traces (with ordering information) for future work.

3. APPLICATIONS AND EXPERIMENTS

As outlined in Section 1, we report on three applications of our framework. From the least to the most sophisticated, these are:

- sharing the cost of assertions among many users (Section 3.1);
- isolating a bug that is deterministic with respect to a predicate (Section 3.2);
- using statistical regression techniques to isolate a bug that is non-deterministic with respect to every considered predicate (Section 3.3).

For each application we report on the overhead of instrumentation. For the last two applications we also quantify how effectively and efficiently the bugs are isolated. While the bug isolation examples presented here are based on finding particular bugs in specific programs, the techniques are general.

3.1 Sharing the Cost of Assertions

In conventional usage, C `assert()` calls are used during program development but are disabled when code ships to boost performance. However, deployed programs fail in unanticipated ways, and it would be helpful to retain some level of assertion checking if the performance penalty were not excessive.

The CCured translator analyzes programs written in C and attempts to prove that pointer operations are memory safe. Where this cannot be done, CCured inserts dynamic checks to enforce memory safety at run time [21]. For our purposes, CCured is simply a source of assertion-dense code. The individual assertions are quite small and fast (array bounds checks, testing for null, etc.) but their performance impact can be significant. We wish to use random sampling to spread this cost among many users.

We have applied sampling to CCured versions of several Olden [10] and SPECINT95 [23] benchmarks. All programs run to completion and we are simply measuring the overhead of performing the dynamic checks.

3.1.1 Whole-Program Sampling

Table 1 summarizes static aspects of the sampling transformation when applied to the entirety of each benchmark. For each program, we give the total number of non-library functions and the number of these that are weightless. As CCured is a whole-program analysis, weightless function identification has the advantage of being able to examine every function body. We also count the number of functions that directly contain at least one instrumentation site. (The remainder are functions that have no sites of their own but that call other non-weightless functions.)

Considering just the functions that directly contain at least one instrumentation site, Table 1 also presents the average number of sites per function, the average number of threshold check points per function, and the average threshold weight for all such points. (Note that the product of the last two of these metrics may exceed the first, as a single instrumentation site may fall under more than one threshold check point. This can be seen in the example in Figure 1 as well.) The average site count shows the density of assertions in the code. The average threshold weight measures how effective our transformation has been in amortizing the cost of countdown checks over multiple sites. Single-site functions are not uncommon; thus, an average threshold weight above two is encouraging because it suggests that overall amortization rates are good.

Table 2 shows the performance impact of unconditional instrumentation as well as sampled instrumentation at various densities. The baseline for comparison is code translated by CCured and from which all dynamic memory safety checks are removed. We report the speedup (> 1) or slowdown (< 1) relative to this baseline when sampling at various den-

benchmark	**function counts**			**average for functions with sites**		
	total	**weightless**	**has sites**	**sites**	**threshold checks**	**threshold weight**
bh	64	15	48	11.9	3.8	9.5
bisort	13	3	10	4.1	1.9	2.6
em3d	15	5	10	5.5	3.1	4.7
health	16	2	14	6.1	2.9	3.1
mst	16	5	11	6.2	2.5	3.9
perimeter	11	4	6	7.8	2.7	2.1
power	19	4	15	5.8	3.0	2.8
treeadd	7	2	5	3.6	2.0	2.5
tsp	14	5	8	15.2	3.9	3.5
compress	20	4	15	7.1	2.9	3.9
go	380	12	359	14.8	6.0	4.7
ijpeg	314	34	267	18.7	5.0	7.3
li	375	16	336	6.2	3.2	2.9

Table 1: Static metrics for CCured benchmarks. Olden benchmarks are listed first, followed by SPECINT95.

benchmark	**always**	**10^{-2}**	**10^{-3}**	**10^{-4}**	**10^{-6}**
bh	2.81	*1.30*	*1.10*	*1.07*	*1.07*
bisort	1.08	*1.07*	*1.05*	*1.05*	*1.04*
em3d	2.14	*1.12*	*1.04*	*1.02*	*1.04*
health	1.02	1.03	*1.02*	*1.02*	*1.02*
mst	1.25	*1.06*	*1.04*	*1.03*	*1.04*
perimeter	1.08	1.19	1.13	1.13	1.12
power	1.36	*1.07*	*1.05*	*1.04*	*1.04*
treeadd	1.13	*1.09*	*1.09*	*1.09*	*1.11*
tsp	1.05	1.17	1.16	1.15	1.14
compress	2.01	*1.21*	*1.14*	*1.14*	*1.14*
go	1.17	1.46	1.26	1.22	1.22
ijpeg	2.46	*1.17*	*1.05*	*1.04*	*1.03*
li	1.58	*1.24*	*1.18*	*1.16*	*1.16*

Table 2: Relative performance of CCured benchmarks with unconditional or sampled instrumentation. *Italics* marks cases where sampled instrumentation outperforms unconditional instrumentation.

sities. All benchmarks were compiled using gcc 3.2 using optimization level -O2. Times were collected on a 1.3 GHz Pentium 4 Linux workstation with 512 megabytes of RAM. Reported speedups represent the average of four runs; each run used a different pre-generated bank of 1024 geometrically distributed random countdowns.

Unconditional instrumentation imposes slowdowns that vary widely from (health: 2%) to (bh: 181%; ijpeg: 146%). Even at a fairly high sampling density of $^1/_{100}$, more than two thirds of our benchmarks run faster than when all checks are always performed. Because each single check is small and fast, this suggests that we have been successful in amortizing the sampling overhead. On the other hand, three benchmarks run slower, with go showing the largest penalty. In these cases, the time recovered by skipping $^{99}/_{100}$ checks is not enough to mask the added overhead of sampling. Furthermore, in all benchmarks, the overhead relative to instrumentation-free code remains large. Only five benchmarks have less than a 10% slowdown, and only one is below 5%.

Performance improves as we reduce the sampling density to $^1/_{1000}$. Most benchmarks suffer less than a 10% penalty relative to uninstrumented code, and half are below 5%. Further reducing the sampling density to $^1/_{10,000}$ shows little change, and by the time we reach $^1/_{1,000,000}$ it is clear that we have reached a performance floor. Three benchmarks (perimeter, tsp, go) are unable to compensate for their sampling overhead relative to unconditional instrumentation, while the remaining ten do run faster. Among these, a few benchmarks (treeadd, compress, li) retain high overhead relative to instrumentation-free code, but in most cases the penalty is quite modest. Some benchmarks that perform the worst using unconditional instrumentation perform quite well with sampling: ijpeg, for example, moves from an unconditional instrumentation overhead of 146% to only 3% with sparse sampling.

3.1.2 Statically Selective Sampling

It is not necessary to put all instrumentation into a single executable; one can easily create multiple executables where each contains a subset of the complete instrumentation. Partitioning instrumentation by site, by module, by function, or by object file are all reasonable schemes. Any individual executable contains less instrumentation and therefore incurs a smaller performance penalty. Fewer sites mean more weightless functions, and therefore better interprocedural optimization per Section 2.3. Functions without instrumentation sites require no code duplication, which limits executable growth. Known trusted code can be exempted from instrumentation, or especially suspect code can be "farmed out" to a larger proportion of users for more intensive study. Given a suitable dynamic instrumentation infrastructure, sites can be added or removed over time as debugging needs and intermediate results warrant.

We have experimented with variants of the CCured benchmarks in which only a single function is instrumented at a time. Whereas fully instrumented executables range from 13%-149% larger than their non-sampling counterparts, average growth for single-function instrumented executables is just 12% for the small Olden benchmarks and 6% for the larger SPECINT95 applications. Performance is uniformly good: at $^1/_{1000}$ sampling, 94% of site-containing functions incur less than 5% slowdown versus instrumentation-free code, while even the worst single function has less than a 12% penalty.

3.1.3 The Effectiveness of Sampling

From these benchmarks and the examples in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, we conclude that realistic deployments will use sampling densities between $^1/_{100}$ and $^1/_{1000}$. But how effective is $^1/_{1000}$ sampling at observing rare program behavior? Suppose we are interested in an event occurring once per hundred executions. To achieve 90% confidence of observing this event in at least one run, we need at least

$$\log(1 - 0.90)/\log\left(1 - \frac{1}{100 \times 1000}\right) = 230{,}258 \text{ runs.}$$

While this is a large number, consider that sixty million Office XP licenses were sold in its first year on the market [19]. Assuming each licensee runs Microsoft Word twice per week, then this user base produces 230,258 runs every nineteen minutes. Achieving 99% confidence of observing an event that occurs on one in a thousand runs requires 4,605,168 runs, which takes less than seven hours to gather.

For smaller deployments, we must either wait longer for sufficient data or increase the sampling density. As we shall see in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, at least for restricted classes of bugs we can perform useful analysis with a few thousand executions. Thus, our techniques are likely most suited to applications where it is possible to gather data with at least $^1/_{1000}$ sampling from thousands of executions per day.

3.2 Bug Isolation Using Predicate Elimination

In this section we consider automatic isolation of deterministic bugs. Recall from Section 1 that for a deterministic bug there is a predicate that becomes true if the program must crash at some point in the future. Deterministic bugs are quite common, though they are generally easier to find and fix using any method than non-deterministic bugs (see Section 3.3).

3.2.1 Instrumentation Strategy

As a case study in finding deterministic bugs we take release 1.2 of the `ccrypt` encryption tool. This version is known to contain a bug that involves overwriting existing files. If the user responds to a confirmation prompt with `EOF` rather than `yes` or `no`, `ccrypt` crashes.

The `EOF` sensitivity suggests that the problem has something to do with `ccrypt`'s interactions with standard file operations. In C, these functions commonly return values to indicate success or failure. Many C application programmers follow the same model for their own error reporting. Thus, randomly sampling function return values may identify key operations that behave differently in successful versus crashed runs. We group function return values into three classes: negative values, zero, and positive values. This reduces the amount of information we must track while still making distinctions consistent with common C programming style.

We instrument `ccrypt` as follows. Consider each syntactic call site that returns scalar values, including both arithmetic types as well as pointers. After each such call, update one of three counters depending upon the sign of the result: one for negative values, one for zeros, and one for positive values. Each call site has its own triple of counters. Thus, when the program terminates, we can examine any function call of interest and ask how often that call returned a negative, zero, or positive value.

For `ccrypt`, there are 570 call sites of interest, for $570 \times 3 = 1710$ counters. Each counter corresponds to a single predicate that is hypothesized to behave differently in successful versus crashed runs. Specifically, we pose the problem as follows:

> Assume that predicates capture incorrect behavior. That is, assume that each predicate P should always be false during correct execution. When P is true, the program either fails (a deterministic bug) or is at increased risk of failing (a non-deterministic bug).

If we eliminate all predicates for which this hypothesis is disproved by observed runtime behavior, then the predicates that remain describe the conditions under which the program fails.

3.2.2 Elimination Strategies

We make no effort to restrict instrumentation to known system or library calls, nor do we distinguish functions that return status codes from those that do not. Most of those 1710 predicates, then, have no bearing on program success or failure. Given a set of runs, we can discard irrelevant predicates using a set of *elimination strategies*:

⟨Elimination by universal falsehood⟩: Disregard any counter that is zero on all runs. These likely represent predicates that can never be true.

⟨Elimination by lack of failing coverage⟩: Disregard any triple of counters all three of which are zero on all failed runs. Because one counter in each triple must always be true for any sample, these likely represent instrumentation sites that are not even reached in failing executions.

⟨Elimination by lack of failing example⟩: Disregard any counter that is zero on all failed runs. These likely represent predicates that need not be true for a failure to occur.

⟨Elimination by successful counterexample⟩: Disregard any counter that has a non-zero value on any successful run. These must represent predicates that can be true without a subsequent program failure.

We characterize these as strategies because they are subject to noise from random sampling, and also because not all are equally applicable to all bugs. For example, elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩ assumes that the bug is deterministic. The other three strategies do not make this assumption, but do require enough runs so that any predicate that is ever true is likely to have been observed true at least once. Note that these strategies are also not independent: ⟨universal falsehood⟩ and ⟨lack of failing coverage⟩ each eliminate a subset of the counters identified by ⟨lack of failing example⟩. Elimination strategies also vary in which kinds of runs they exploit: ⟨successful counterexample⟩ considers only successful runs; ⟨lack of failing example⟩ and ⟨lack of failing coverage⟩ consider only failures; ⟨universal falsehood⟩ uses both.

3.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

One function call, with one update to one of three counters, is considered one instrumentation site. We transform the instrumentation to be sampled rather than unconditional using the framework described in Section 2. In lieu of a large user community, we generate many runs artificially in the spirit of the Fuzz project [20]. Each run uses a randomly selected set of present or absent files, randomized command line flags, and randomized responses to ccrypt prompts including the occasional EOF.

We have collected 2990 trial runs at a sampling rate of 1/1000; 88 of these end in a crash. Applying each elimination strategy independently to the counter traces:

⟨**Universal falsehood**⟩ discards 1569 counters that are zero on all runs, leaving 141 candidate predicates.

⟨**Lack of failing coverage**⟩ discards 526 counter triples that are all zero on all crashes, leaving 132 candidate predicates.

⟨**Lack of failing example**⟩ discards 1665 counters that are zero on all crashes, leaving 45 candidate predicates.

⟨**Successful counterexample**⟩ discards 139 counters that are non-zero on any successful run, leaving 1571 candidate predicates.

At first glance, elimination by ⟨universal falsehood⟩ is quite effective while elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩ seems rather poor. However, these two strategies test disjoint properties and can be combined to good effect. The combination leaves only those predicates that are sometimes observed to be true in failed runs but never observed to be true in successful runs. For our ccrypt trials, only two predicates meet this criterion:

```
1. traverse.c:320:  file_exists() return value > 0
2. traverse.c:122:  xreadline() return value == 0
```

Examining the corresponding code shows that these predicates are consistent with the circumstances under which the bug is reported to occur. This call to file_exists() returns "1" when an output file already exists. A confirmation prompt is presented, and this call to xreadline() returns the user's reply, or null if the input terminal is at EOF. Inspection of the code immediately following the xreadline() call shows that the programmer forgot to check for the EOF case: he assumes that xreadline() returns a non-null string, and immediately inspects its contents. We have successfully isolated this (known) bug in ccrypt, and the fix is clear.

While the file_exists() predicate is not itself the cause of the bug, the fact that it appears on our list is useful information. It represents a necessary condition under which crashes occur. That may be helpful, for example, if the engineer wishes to reproduce the bug in-house for further study. Of course, there should be some runs where file_exists() reports that the file exists but xreadline() returns a valid response from the user and therefore the program does not crash. If the file_exists() call is sampled on any such run, elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩ correctly determines that this predicate does not imply failure. It will be eliminated from further consideration, and only the true "smoking gun," the call to xreadline(), will remain. Thus we have the ability to identify not only the direct cause of a bug but also related behaviors that are strongly but imperfectly correlated with failure. We further explore this idea of broad correlation in Section 3.3, where even the buggy line of code itself does not always cause a crash.

As previously noted, the first three elimination strategies partially overlap, whereas the last, ⟨successful counterexample⟩, is distinct. ⟨Universal falsehood⟩ and ⟨successful counterexample⟩ only look at successful runs, hence are easily analyzed together. ⟨Lack of failing example⟩ in general eliminates the most features, and therefore is also a good candidate to combine with ⟨successful counterexample⟩. Doing so in the case of ccrypt leaves us with exactly the same two features, though in general one might find different results. Elimination by ⟨lack of failing coverage⟩, on the other hand, is an inherently weaker strategy: when combined with ⟨successful counterexample⟩, we are still left with 86 features.

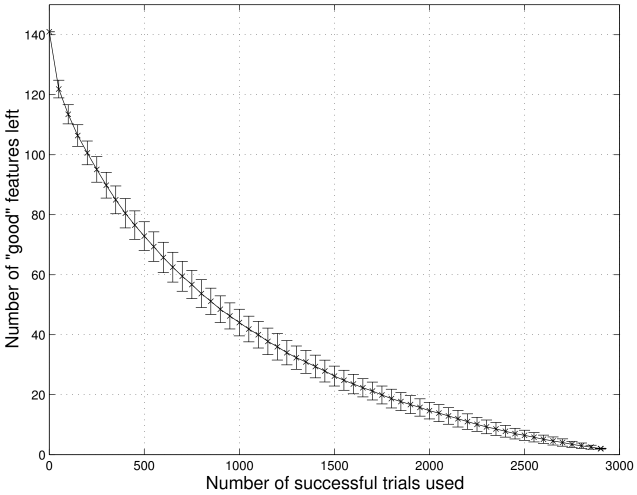

Figure 2: Progressive elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩ as successful runs accumulate. Crosses mark means; error bars mark one standard deviation.

3.2.4 *Refinement over time*

In order to gain a better understanding of how the elimination strategies benefit from increasing the number of runs, we have experimented with randomized subsets of our complete run suite. We have seen that elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩ is quite effective when given a few thousand successful runs; how well does it perform with a smaller suite? We start with the 141 candidate predicates that are ever nonzero on any run. We assemble a random subset of fifty successful runs and filter the predicate set using elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩. We then add another fifty runs, and another fifty, and so on in steps up to the full set of 2902 successful runs. We repeat this entire process one hundred times to gauge how rapidly one can expect the predicate set to shrink as more runs arrive over time.

Figure 2 shows the results. The crosses mark the mean number of predicates remaining, while the vertical bars extend one standard deviation above and below the mean. The short vertical bars in this case tells us that there is relatively little diversity in each of the hundred random subsets at any given size. The results show that, on average, 1750 runs are enough to isolate twenty candidate features, another 500 runs reduces that count by half, and a total of 2600 runs is enough to narrow the set of good features down to just five. One would expect more variety in runs collected from real users rather than an automated script. Greater diversity can only benefit the analysis, as it would provide more novel counterexamples and therefore may eliminate more uninteresting predicates more rapidly.

3.2.5 Performance Impact

Instrumenting function return values confounds several of the optimizations proposed in Section 2. If most function calls are instrumentation sites, and if most function calls terminate acyclic regions, then most acyclic regions contain only a single site and we have poor amortization of sampling overhead. Furthermore, ccrypt is built one object file at a time, and we must conservatively assume that any cross-object function call is not weightless. Thus, for much of ccrypt, our sampling transformation devolves to a simpler but slower pattern of checking the next-sample countdown at each and every site.

In spite of this, the performance impact of sampled instrumentation is minimal. Using an experimental setup similar to that described earlier in Section 3.1.1, we find that the overhead for 1/1000 sampling is less than 4%, and progressively sparser sampling rates shrink this still further. Unconditional instrumentation also performs well here, making either reasonable for this particular application. In the next section, though, we consider a more invasive instrumentation strategy that requires sampling to keep overhead under control.

3.3 Statistical Debugging

In this section we consider the automatic isolation of non-deterministic bugs. Recall from Section 1 that a bug is non-deterministic with respect to a set of program predicates if no predicate in the set is perfectly correlated with program crashes. For this case study we use version 1.06 of the GNU implementation of bc. We find that feeding bc nine megabytes of random input causes it to crash roughly one time in four from, as it turns out, a previously unknown buffer overrun error. Since bc sometimes terminates successfully even when it overruns the buffer, this bug is non-deterministic.

We instrument bc using a variation on our previous strategy of counter triples. We abandon elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩[1] in favor of statistical modeling to identify behavior that is broadly correlated with failure.

3.3.1 Instrumentation Strategy

We instrument bc to guess and randomly check a large number of predicates. As before, our goal is to identify predicates that capture bad behavior: false when the program succeeds and true when the program crashes. We cast an extremely broad net, but with an eye toward pointer and buffer errors. For pointers, null pointers are of interest. Relative addresses of pointers may be interesting as well, as this may capture cases where one pointer scans within a second pointed-to buffer. Checking pointer/pointer equality may reveal aliasing that, when not anticipated by the programmer, can lead to dangling "wild" pointer bugs. Scalar variables serve as array indexes, pointer offsets, and in many other roles; relationships among scalars may reveal buffer overruns, unanticipated consequences of negative values, invalid enumeration constants, or a variety of other problems.

At any direct assignment to a scalar variable a, we identify all other local or global variables $\{\mathtt{b}_1, \mathtt{b}_2, \ldots, \mathtt{b}_n\}$ that are also in scope and that have the same type. We then compare the updated a to each $\mathtt{b}_i$, and note whether a was less than, equal to, or greater than $\mathtt{b}_i$. We compare pointers to same-typed pointers as well, and additionally compare each pointer for equality with null. One comparison between a and $\mathtt{b}_i$, which bumps one of three counters, is considered to be one instrumentation site subject to random sampling. When an instrumented application terminates, it emits the vector of counter triples along with a flag indicating whether it completed successfully or was aborted by a fatal signal.

For bc there are 10,050 counter triples, or 30,150 counters in all. The vast majority of these are of no interest: either they compare completely unrelated variables, or they express relationships that behave identically in both successful and failed runs. The challenge is to find the few predicates that matter.

3.3.2 Crash Prediction Using Logistic Regression

To find the important predicates, we recast bug isolation as a statistical analysis problem. Each run of bc constitutes one sample point consisting of 30,150 observed *features* (counters) and one binary *outcome* ($0 = \text{succeeded}, 1 = \text{crashed}$). Given numerous data points (sampled runs), we want to identify a subset of our 30,150 features that predict the outcome. This is equivalent to the machine learning problem of learning a binary classifier with feature selection, i.e., using as few input features as possible.

In the classification setting, we take a set of data with known binary output (a training set), and attempt to learn a binary classifier that gives good predictions on a test set. The learning process usually involves additional parameters whose values can be determined using a cross-validation set. In our case, the end goal is to narrow down the set of features. Hence our method must balance good classification performance with aggressive feature selection.

A binary classifier takes feature values as inputs, and outputs a prediction of either 0 or 1. *Logistic regression* [17] is a method of learning a binary classifier where the output function is assumed to be logistic. The logistic function is a continuous "S"-shaped curve approaching 0 on one end, and 1 on the other. The output can be interpreted as a probability measure of how likely it is that the data point falls within class 0 or 1. Quantizing the logistic function output then gives us a binary classifier: if the output is greater than 1/2, then the data point is classified as class 1 (a crash), otherwise it falls under class 0 (a successful run). Feature selection can be achieved by *regularizing* the function parameters to ignore most input features, forcing it to form a model that predicts success or failure using just a small selection of sampled features. Regularization is important for our purposes because we expect that most of our features are wild guesses, but that there may be just a few that correctly characterize the bug.

While other techniques for combined classification and feature selection exist, few of them are particularly well-suited for this problem. Some methods [15, 24] calculate a univariate correlation coefficient independently for each feature; other methods, such as decision trees [6], are more computationally intensive. In our dataset, the features are clearly not independent of each other, and the size of the problem can potentially be too large for more computationally intensive methods. Furthermore, logistic regression is a discriminative classification method, and thus does not make any assumptions about the underlying distribution of the input. This is crucial since our features arise from a decidedly

[1] Because the bug is non-deterministic, if we have enough runs no predicates will satisfy elimination by ⟨successful counterexample⟩.

artificial process and would be difficult to characterize using simple distributions.

Suppose our training set $\mathcal{D}$ consists of M data points $(x_1, y_1), \ldots, (x_M, y_M)$, where each $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^N$ denotes a vector of input predicate counters, and each $y_i = \{0, 1\}$ denotes the corresponding output label. To learn a good classifier, we can maximize the *log likelihood* of the training set.

$$\begin{aligned} LL(\mathcal{D}) \; = \; & \sum_{i=1}^{M} [y_i \log P(Y = 1|x) \\ & \quad +(1 - y_i) \log(1 - P(Y = 1|x))]. \end{aligned}$$

Here the output labels y_i are used as indicator functions to zero out exactly one of the two terms in each summand. In logistic regression, the distribution $P(Y = 1|x)$ is modeled as the logistic function $\mu_{\tilde{\beta}}(x)$ with parameters $\tilde{\beta} = \langle \beta_0 \in \mathbb{R}, \beta \in \mathbb{R}^N \rangle$.

$$P(Y = 1|x) = \mu_{\tilde{\beta}}(x) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(-\beta_0 - \beta^T x)}.$$

The logistic parameters β_0 and β take on the respective roles as the intercept and slope of the classifier, and essentially weigh the relative importance of each feature in the final outcome. We expect most of the input features to have no influence over the success or failure of the program, so we place an additional constraint that forces most of the β's toward zero. This is accomplished by subtracting a penalty term based on the ℓ_1 norm $\|\tilde{\beta}\|_1 = \sum_{j=0}^{M} |\beta_j|$. We can tune the importance of this *regularization term* through a *regularization parameter* λ. The penalized log likelihood function is:

$$\begin{aligned} LL(\tilde{\beta}|\mathcal{D}, \lambda) \; = \; & \sum_{i=1}^{M} [y_i \log \mu_{\tilde{\beta}}(x_i) + (1 - y_i) \log(1 - \mu_{\tilde{\beta}}(x_i))] \\ & - \lambda \|\tilde{\beta}\|_1. \end{aligned}$$

An assignment of β coefficients that maximizes this function represents a model that maximizes the fidelity of its predictions while still limiting itself to form those predictions on the basis of only a small number of features from the complete feature set.

3.3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Our bc data set consists of 4390 runs with distinct random inputs and distinct randomized 1/1000 sampling. We randomly chose 2729 runs for training, 322 runs for cross-validation, and 1339 runs for testing. Although there are 30,150 raw features, many can be discarded immediately using elimination by ⟨universal falsehood⟩: in the training set 27,242 features are always zero. Hence the effective number of features used in training is 2908. (Elimination by ⟨lack of failing example⟩ can eliminate another 647 features that are zero for all failed runs. However we find that the presence or absence of these 647 features does not significantly affect the quality of the regularized logistic regression results.)

To make the magnitude of the β parameters comparable, the feature values must be on the same scale. Hence all the input features are shifted and scaled to lie on the interval $[0, 1]$, then normalized to have unit sample variance. A suitable value for the regularization parameter λ is determined through cross-validation to be 0.3. The model is then trained using stochastic gradient ascent to reach a local maximum of the penalized log likelihood. Using a step size of 10^{-5}, the model usually converges within sixty iterations through the training set. This takes roughly thirty minutes in MATLAB on a 1.8 GHz Pentium 4 CPU with 1 GB of RAM.

```
152  void
153  more_arrays ()
154  {
155    int indx;
156    int old_count;
157    bc_var_array **old_ary;
158    char **old_names;
159
160    /* Save the old values. */
161    old_count = a_count;
162    old_ary = arrays;
163    old_names = a_names;
164
165    /* Increment by a fixed amount and allocate. */
166    a_count += STORE_INCR;
167    arrays = (bc_var_array **) bc_malloc (a_count*si...
168    a_names = (char **) bc_malloc (a_count*sizeof(ch...
169
170    /* Copy the old arrays. */
171    for (indx = 1; indx < old_count; indx++)
172      arrays[indx] = old_ary[indx];
173
174
175    /* Initialize the new elements. */
176    for (; indx < v_count; indx++)
177      arrays[indx] = NULL;
178
179    /* Free the old elements. */
180    if (old_count != 0)
181      {
182        free (old_ary);
183        free (old_names);
184      }
185  }
```

Figure 3: Suspect bc function more_arrays(). All top-ranked crash-predicting features point to large values of indx on line 176.

Once the model has been trained, predicates with the largest β coefficients suggest where to begin looking for the bug. In our case, the top five ranked coefficients are well-separated in magnitude from the rest, and show an unmistakable trend:

```
1. storage.c:176:  more_arrays():  indx > scale
2. storage.c:176:  more_arrays():  indx > use_math
3. storage.c:176:  more_arrays():  indx > opterr
4. storage.c:176:  more_arrays():  indx > next_func
5. storage.c:176:  more_arrays():  indx > i_base
```

The source code for more_arrays() appears in Figure 3. A comment earlier in the same file suggests that this one of a suite of "three functions for increasing the number of functions, variables, or arrays that are needed." The logic is a fairly clear instance of the buffer reallocation idiom, even to one unfamiliar with the code: line 167 allocates a larger chunk of memory; line 171 is the top of a loop that copies values over from the old, smaller array; line 176 completes the resize by zeroing out the new extra space. As the comment suggests, there are two similar functions (more_functions() and more_variables()) nearby that do largely the same thing with different storage pools. The text of these three functions is nearly identical, but each uses different global variables (such as a_count versus f_count versus v_count).

The top ranked predicates seem bizarre on first examination, because the variables they relate do not appear to have any real connection to each other or to `more_arrays()`. For example, `scale` tracks significant digits for floating point calculations, while `use_math` records whether an initial math library is to be loaded. Why would crashes tend to happen when local variable `indx` exceeds these seemingly unrelated globals on this particular line? An obvious hypothesis is that `indx` is simply unusually large in such cases. If `indx` is large, then it will tend to be larger than any number of otherwise unrelated variables. Perhaps crashes occur when the input to `bc` defines unusually large numbers of arrays.

Closer scrutiny of `more_arrays()` quickly reveals this to be the case. The allocation on line 167 requests space for `a_count` items. The copying loop on line 171 ranges from `1` through `old_count - 1`. The zeroing loop on line 176 continues on from `old_count` through `v_count - 1`. And here we find the bug: the new storage buffer has room for `a_count` elements, but the second loop is incorrectly bound by `v_count` instead. After a glimpse at the neighboring `more_variables()` function it is clear that `more_arrays()` was created by copying and pasting `more_variables()` and then changing names like `v_count` and `v_names` to `a_count` and `a_names`. The loop bound on line 176 was missed in the renaming.

The logistic regression model points us at the buggy line, the buggy variable, and even reveals something of the conditions under which the bug appears. Having found the bug, it is reasonable to ask whether the statistical analysis could have pointed at it even more directly. The mistaken use of `v_count` instead of `a_count` on line 176 means that a buffer overrun occurs when `indx > a_count` on line 176. This does correspond to a predicate sampled by our system, but this predicate is ranked 240th in the trained model. Why was this, the smoking gun, not ranked first?

There are several reasons to consider. Samples are taken randomly, while the model itself is trained using stochastic gradient ascent. Thus, a degree of noise is fundamental to the process. Even crashing is not guaranteed: out of 320 runs in which sampling spotted `indx > a_count` at least once, 66 did not crash. Thus, C programs can "get lucky", meaning that this is not a strict overrun $\Longrightarrow$ crash implication. Manual inspection of the data reveals a high degree of redundancy among many instrumentation sites within `more_arrays()`, meaning that the model has several features to choose from that have equivalent predictive power. This suggests that our counters may be too fine-grained: we are distinguishing many behaviors that are in fact so tightly interrelated as to be equivalent.

This bug seems clear enough once found. However it has been present and undiscovered at least since 1992 (the time stamp on this file in the oldest version of GNU `bc` that we can find). Many bugs are obvious only once one knows where to look. The logistic regression results directed us to one misbehaving variable on one line of code, out of 8910 lines in `bc` as a whole. Our approach does not automatically find and fix bugs. But it does suggest where to start looking, and what sort of scenarios (e.g., unusually large `indx`) to consider. Although we are still learning about the capabilities of this system and how to interpret its results, we believe that statistically guided debugging has the potential to make the process of finding and fixing bugs more efficient and more responsive to the needs of end users.

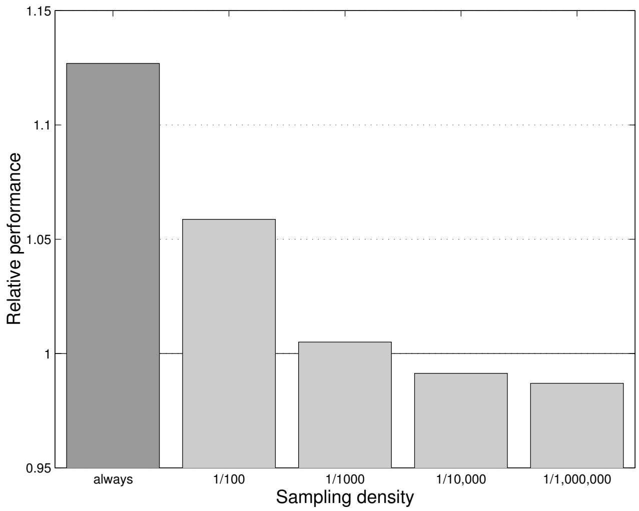

Figure 4: Relative performance of `bc` with unconditional or sampled instrumentation

3.3.4 *Performance Impact*

Our `bc` instrumentation is fairly dense. The leftmost bar in Figure 4 shows that if this instrumentation is added without sampling, the performance penalty is 13%. A sampling density of 1/100 cuts this in half (6%). At the 1/1000 density used in our statistical debugging experiment, the penalty is barely measurable (0.5%). Still lower densities show small, unexpected speedups relative to uninstrumented code. This is apparently due to effects such as changes in relative code alignment, cache behavior, measurement noise, and other unpredictable factors.

4. RELATED WORK

Sampling has a long history, with most applications focusing on performance profiling and optimization. Any sampling system must define a trigger mechanism that signals when a sample is to be taken. Typical triggers include periodic hardware timers/interrupts [8, 25, 27], periodic software event counters (e.g., every nth function call) [3], or both. In most cases, the sampling interval is strictly periodic; this may suffice when hunting for large performance bottlenecks, but may systematically miss rare events.

The Digital Continuous Profiling Infrastructure [1] is unusual in choosing sampling intervals randomly. However, the random distribution is uniform, such as one sample every 60K to 64K cycles. Samples thus extracted are not independent. If one sample is taken, there is zero chance of taking any sample in the next 1–59,999 cycles and zero chance of *not* taking exactly one sample in the next 60K–64K cycles. We trigger samples based on a geometric distribution, which correctly models the interval between successful independent coin tosses. The resulting data is a statistically rigorous fair random sample, which in turn grants access to a large domain of powerful statistical analyses.

Recent work in trace collection has focused on program understanding. Techniques for capturing program traces confront challenges similar to those we face here, such as minimizing performance overhead and managing large quantities of captured data. Dynamic analysis in particular must encode, compress, or otherwise reduce an incoming trace stream in real time, as the program runs [12, 22]. It may be difficult to directly adapt dynamic trace analysis techniques to a domain where the trace is sampled and therefore incomplete.

Our effort to understand and debug programs by selecting predicates is partly inspired by Daikon [13]. Like Daikon, we begin with fairly unstructured guesses and eliminate those that do not appear to hold. Unlike Daikon, we are concerned with gathering data from production code, which leads us to use sampling of a large number of runs and statistical models; the Daikon experiments are done on a smaller number of complete traces. We are also interested in detecting bugs, while Daikon focuses on the somewhat different problem of detecting program invariants.

The DIDUCE project [16] also attempts to identify bugs using analysis of executions. Unlike Daikon, most processing does take place within the client program. As in our study, DIDUCE attempts to relate changes in predicates to the manifestation of bugs. However, DIDUCE performs complete tracing and focuses on discrete state changes, such as the first time a predicate transitioned from true to false. Our approach is more probabilistic: we wish to identify broad trends over time that correlate predicate violations with increased likelihood of failure.

Software tomography as realized through the GAMMA system [5] shares our goal of low-overhead distributed monitoring of deployed code. Applications to date have focused on code coverage and traditional performance monitoring tasks, whereas our primary interest is bug isolation.

5. PRIVACY AND SECURITY

As noted in Section 1, the most important program behaviors are those exhibited by deployed software in the hands of users. However, any scheme for monitoring software post-deployment necessarily raises privacy and security concerns. The issues are complex and as much social as technical. However, our approach can only succeed if users feel safe contributing to the shared data pool. Thus, addressing these concerns is both a moral and a practical imperative.

The experiences of Netscape/Mozilla with crash feedback systems may be illustrative. We have met with members of the Netscape Talkback Team, a group of quality assurance engineers who manage crash reports from the automated feedback system. Considerable effort has gone into designing the client side of this system so that users are fully informed. The system is strictly opt-in on a per-failure basis, or may be disabled entirely. The user may optionally examine the contents of the crash report, and no information is ever sent to Netscape without explicit authorization. Figure 5 shows the sort of information presented each time Netscape or Mozilla has crash data to submit.

Not all users will read or understand these assurances. Even so, there are some technical measures we can take to protect the privacy of even non-technically savvy users. The very nature of the sampling process itself affords a degree of anonymity. We collect a small bit of information from many, many users; any single run has little revelatory power.

Some data, or some parts of execution, may be so sensitive that even this diffuse information leakage is unacceptable. Several type-based analyses under the broad heading of secure information flow [7, 26, 28] may be helpful here. Such systems statically identify parts of a program that manipulate sensitive data; we can avoid inserting instrumentation that reveals such values. Of course, this will make it difficult to track bugs in security-sensitive parts of an application, but that trade-off is always present: one can only fix bugs about which the customer is willing to provide useful information.

> The Netscape Quality Feedback Agent is a feature that gathers predefined technical information about Communicator and sends it back to the Netscape software development team so they can improve future versions of Communicator.
>
> . . .
>
> No information is sent until you can examine exactly what is being sent.
>
> . . .
>
> Information gathered by this agent is limited to information about the state of Communicator when it has an error. Other sensitive information such as web sites visited, email messages, email addresses, passwords, and profiles will not be collected.
>
> All information Netscape collects via this agent will be used only for the purposes of fixing product defects and improving the quality of Netscape Communicator. This data is for internal diagnostic purposes only and will not be shared with third parties.
>
> For more information on Netscape's general privacy policy, go to: `<http://home.netscape.com/legal_notices/privacy.html>`
>
> Communicator activates the agent dialog box when a problem occurs, or when it has gathered information that Netscape needs to improve future versions of Communicator.
>
> . . .
>
> If you prefer to disable the agent, you may do so here:

Figure 5: Privacy assurances as used in Netscape Quality Feedback Agent

When using statistical models such as that of Section 3.3, an attractive mechanism for protecting user anonymity becomes available. Many statistical analyses are characterized by a set of *sufficient statistics*: a collection of values that completely capture the internal state of the analysis. For example, if one wanted to compute the mean of a stream of numbers, then a running total and a count would be sufficient statistics: the mean can be computed from these without retaining the individual numbers in the stream. Similarly, once the logistic regression parameters have been updated with a new trace, the trace itself may be discarded. If the analysis host is compromised, an attacker cannot recover the precise details of any single past trace.

A statistical approach designed to cope with noise offers some protection against malicious users who might try to poison the central database with bogus data, or overwhelm it with data representing the particular bugs they wish to see fixed. Recent work on protecting privacy and preventing abuse in collaborative filtering systems may also be applicable [9, 11].

6. CONCLUSIONS

We have described a sampling infrastructure for gathering information about software from the set of runs produced by its user community. To ensure that rare events are accurately represented, we use a Bernoulli process to do the sampling, and we have described an efficient implementation of that process. We have also presented several sample applications: sharing the overhead of assertions, predicate guessing and elimination to isolate a deterministic bug, and regularized logistic regression to isolate a non-deterministic memory corruption error.

7. REFERENCES

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