Toward a Better Understanding of How to Develop Software Under Stress – Drafting the Lines for Future Research

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Abstract: Software is often produced under significant time constraints. Our idea is to understand the effects of various software development practices on the performance of developers working in stressful environments, and identify the best operating conditions for software developed under stressful conditions collecting data through questionnaires, non-invasive software measurement tools that can collect measurable data about software engineers and the software they develop, without intervening their activities, and biophysical sensors and then try to recreated also in different processes or key development practices such conditions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Software is often produced under significant time constraints. Our idea is to understand the effects of various software development practices on the performance of developers working in stressful environments, and identify the best operating conditions for software developed under stressful conditions. To achieve this goal, we argue to divide the research in the following two phases: "in vitro" and "in vivo".

In the "in vitro" phase, the conditions under which people operate the best will be identified and monitored by collecting data through questionnaires, non-invasive software measurement tools that can collect measurable data about software engineers and the software they develop, without intervening their activities, and biophysical sensors.

In the "in vivo" phase, the best working conditions identified in the earlier "in vitro" phase will be recreated in order to study their effects in various stressful conditions. In this phase, it will also be investigated the effects of well-known development practices such as pair programming, test driven development, inspection, collective code ownership, constant integration.

In the next section we briefly survey the state of the art and related works. Then, in Section 3 we define the problem statement and specific research questions, Finally, in Section 4 we present our view of the possible solution of the problem and concrete approach to the novel research agenda.

2 RELATED WORKS

2.1 Software Process Improvement

The work on software process improvement has spanned decades using various methodologies (Marino and Succi, 1989; Valerio et al., 1997; Vernazza et al., 2000), processes (Kivi et al., 2000; Petrinja et al., 2010; Rossi et al., 2012a; Corral et al., 2013b; Kovács et al., 2004), and devices (Corral et al., 2011; Corral et al., 2013a) and there is a large corpus of scientific studies referring to it as it is evidenced by the recent literature reviews on the subject (Khan et al., 2017). The discipline is now moving to acknowledge specific aspects of it, like SMEs working on web-based systems (Sulayman and Mendes, 2009), process and simulations (Ali et al., 2014), agile methods (Campanelli and Parreiras, 2015).

Particular relevance is now placed on empirical evaluations of new approaches (Unterkalmsteiner et al., 2012; Pedrycz et al., 2015a). The proposed work moves exactly along these lines, proposing new approaches to a particularly difficult development process centered on a clear empirical understanding of the best conditions under which software developers and engineers produce their work.

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2.2 Influence of the State of Mind on the Quality of Developers

It is a well known fact that the state of mind influences work and that especially positive feeling tend to be correlated with high quality work, especially in knowledge-intensive fields, as discussed in multiple research works, like the one of (Amabile, 1996; Sillitti et al., 2004; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Baas et al., 2008; Janes and Succi, 2012; Di Bella et al., 2013)

The influence of the state of mind on the quality of the software being developed has been recognized since the early stages of software engineering. From the 1950-s there have been studies trying to understand the psychological profiles of developers acknowledging the intrinsic connection that exists between the state of the mind and the quality of the code, like the work of Rowan (Rowan, 1957), and the role of personalities and of interpersonal communications has been a central part of the agile approaches to software development as championed by the works of Cockburn and Highsmith (Cockburn and Highsmith, 2001), Williams and Cockburn (Williams and Cockburn, 2003; Fronza et al., 2009; Feldt et al., 2010; Denning, 2012), and others.

There has also been a significant literature evidencing that happiness and positive feelings have a positive impact on quality and productivity in the workplace and specifically promotes creativity (Brand et al., 2007; Davis, 2009). This is particularly important in software development, which includes a high amount of creativity as it has been acknowledged for many years now in several research work like (Fischer, 1987; Glass et al., 1992; Shaw, 2004; Knobelsdorf and Romeike, 2008; Lewis et al., 2011).

More recently, there have been studies linking the specific concept of well-being and concentration to the effectiveness in producing quality software. In 2002, Succi et al. have conducted one of the first research endeavours linking specific software practices to job satisfaction and low turnover (Succi et al., 2002), and then creating a model for explaining job satisfaction and its influence on quality and productivity (Pedrycz et al., 2011), exploring how developers move in their workplace (Corral et al., 2012) and relating pair programming with developers attention (Sillitti et al., 2012).

Scientific research has also explored the specific concept of happiness at work, connecting it to high-quality software artifacts like the works of (Khan et al., 2011; Graziotin et al., 2013; Graziotin et al., 2014; Murgia et al., 2014).

In all these studies the main vehicle for collecting data have been questionnaires and subjective evaluations. Biophysical signals have not been used. Some research has already performed also using such signals using suitable devices, and it is concentrated in mainly three research units.

2.3 Studies of Biometric Sensors to Evaluate the State of the Mind of Developers

In this subsection we concentrate the description on the key studies using biometrics sensors to evaluate the state of the mind of developers and their relationships with tasks to accomplish. There is not any significant research effort on how to develop software under stress. Fritz at al. obtain metrics that correlate with software developers performance. In (Züger and Fritz, 2015) they used interruptibility while (Müller and Fritz, 2015) used positive and negative emotions of software developers as metrics of progress in the change task.

They analyze data from multiple bio-sensors, including eye trackers for measuring pupil size and eye blinks, electroencephalography to determine brain activity, electrodermal activity sensors to detect skin-related activity, and heart-related sensors. They apply methods of supervised learning (Naive Bayes) to distinguish levels of these cognitive states.

The limit of their approach is that the devices using to collect the data were mostly focused on collecting emotions and the data analysis was focused on finding correlation between emotions and progress, which was the core of the study. Monitoring the state of the mind in depth was not their purpose so that analysis was not precise, and was also limited because: (i) the assessment of emotions was performed subjectively by the participants; (ii) a single channel electroencephalogram (EEG) device was used, which may result in an error of up to fifty percent (Maskeliunas et al., 2016).

Apel with colleagues study the work of the brain using very accurate techniques, like the functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). They detected activation specific Broadmann-areas during code comprehension (Siegmund et al., 2014).In their follow up work they investigated the difference between bottom-up program comprehension and comprehension with semantic cues in terms of brain areas involved (Siegmund et al., 2017).A group led by Heui Seok Lim uses a full EEG device, like the one proposed in this research. However, they focus mostly on exploring how the mind of developers evolved from novice to experts in program comprehension tasks, and therefore have a completely different focus than ours (Lee et al., 2016).

3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Constant stress leads to physiological disadaptation with increased fatigability and to burn-out syndrome with decreased motivation for work, and thus inability to perform such important tasks. The main question is therefore, how it is possible to develop software when the stress is there and cannot be eliminated, but needs to be somehow mitigated to ensure high quality work. In other terms, the research problem is to find and study the best operating conditions for software that is developed under major time and psychological pressure for the developers like, for instance, when a remotely operated spacecraft is moving to an undesired location due to an error in the software, or a controller of a pipeline is wrongly operating causing leakages of gas.

Moreover, we will consider the following two subproblems: (i) when the stress occurs in a limited period of time, like when there is the need to fix a single safety-critical error within one working day; (ii) when the stress spans longer intervals, like when a safety critical condition arises on a whole system, so that multiple days or weeks of work are required.

These two scenarios require different approaches, since on the first case, very intense working patterns can be adopted, taking into account that a compensation might occur in the immediate future after the stress has occurred, while in the second there should be a pattern of work ensuring the ability to maintain the quality and productivity of a team for a longer period of time. In detail, specific research questions that can be addressed are:

RQ1: what is the effect of stress induced by the work-conditions on the mind of software developers and engineers and the implication of this stress on the quality of the software systems being produced,

RQ2: what mind states can be observed in software developers and engineers during stressful working conditions that are associated with either low or high quality and productivity, and then, specifically: **(a)** what are the typical working conditions when the stress results in low quality work or in loss of productivity, and how these condition can be mapped on mind states of developers, and **(b)** what are the detailed software development processes or key individual processes and products patterns and practices that are observed to correlate with high quality and the productivity during critical circumstances and what are the associated mind states of software developers and engineers,

RQ3: what software development processes or key individual processes and products patterns and practices, or other actions can be elaborated to recreate in software developers and engineers the mind states that are typically associated with high quality and productivity, and how they can be elaborated within specific software development environments,

RQ4: what are the quantitative effects of the application of such processes and key individual processes and products patterns and practices in terms of productivity and quality of the generated software as functions of the condition of their use (a mapping between a working context and a problem to face).

The research questions require a lot of practical effort and preparation of specific environments to answer. In the next section we propose an approach to develop such an environment based on neuroimaging techniques, non-invasive software measurement tools and methods for evaluation of individual processes and products patterns in software engineering.

4 PROPOSED APPROACH

Despite the recent trend of using neuroimaging techniques such as fMRI to understand the mind of developers, most work has been focused on general understanding of developers mind in the general context. As mentioned above such work has contributed to the understanding of developers mind, but it is often not clear how those general understandings can be applied to concrete real-world problems in software industry. In contrast, our approach focuses on a specific and critical context, that is, software development under stress-inducing circumstances. Understanding of developers mind in this specific context is not only scientifically novel, but also can make practical impact on software development practices.

While we exploit emerging neuroimaging techniques (in particular, multi-channel EEG), these new techniques do not directly show which development methodologies and practices lead to better performance. Best development methodologies and practices can be identified only after considering not only neroimages but also other numerous factors related to developers and the artifacts created by the developers. Thus, the approach should support understanding not only mental effects of various software development practices on the performance of developers working in stressful environments. The key feature of the approach is systematic investigation of the practices from most relevant points.

4.1 Outline of the Research Agenda

In this position paper we describe our agenda for the future research in the selected direction. At the first step we will select a family of software development processes for stressful circumstances. Further, we will collect key individual processes and products patterns and practices that are particularly useful when the critical circumstances arise. Next, we develop a framework for quantitative evaluation of such processes and key individual processes and products patterns and practices in terms of: **(a)** the conditions when best to use them (working context – problem to face; development environment; kind of software being developed), and **(b)** the results in terms of productivity and quality of the generated software.

Finally, it is necessary to develop a set of tools that can help software engineers practice software development processes appropriate for a given context. For example, when software engineers work in an emergency situation, they will be able to accomplish their work more effectively and efficiently, with the help of the provided tools. Moreover, a system of integrated tools based on existing physical devices and software components and supplemented by a suitable integration layer and additional analysis techniques to collect the experimental data and to analyze it, to produce the results mentioned above.

We propose not only a systematic adoption of non-invasive measurement techniques (including analysis of processes and of products - code repositories, issue tracking data, budgeting information), but we couple it on one side with more standard data collected via surveys and on the other to biophysical data collected through suitable wearable devices, like wearable EEG, eye tracking devices, etc. This is possible by our partnership with key software development organizations which produce software for safety and business critical applications. We will be able to collect data from a uniquely large set of environments.

Various experimentation are naturally fit into the proposed research agenda and could be used by other researchers as the cornerstone for subsequent analyses and also for identifying additional possible interpretations and for proposing other processes and product patterns and practices.

4.2 Background Research

The proposed agenda will be implemented along the following lines: **(a)** data collection, **(b)** data analysis and model construction, and **(c)** model validation and refinement.

The first line refers mostly to the data collection. The work in this area will start from the idea of non-invasive data collection recently revised and actualized with the system Innometrics, whose most recent description will be presented at the 33rd ACM Symposium on Applied Computing (SAC 2018) (Bykov et al., 2018). The data collection at companies will also be performed through suitable questionnaires and surveys, using the best standards in the field as can be applied in software engineering, as described in (Pedrycz et al., 2011; Ivanov et al., 2016). Additional data will be collected from full capacity EEG devices, one instance of which is already in use for feasibility studies at Innopolis University using the on one side the recent experience collected in software engineering (Lee et al., 2016) and on the other the decades long competence presence in neurosciences.

The second line refers to data analysis and model construction. As mentioned, the data will be analyzed using statistics and machine learning. Statistics will be the standard statistical tools, as described in (Moser et al., 2007), more advanced regression techniques, as described in (di Bella et al., 2013), approaches coming from reliability growth models (Ivanov et al., 2016). In terms of machine learning, we propose to use simple models based on logistic regression, support vector machine and random indexes (Fronza et al., 2013), techniques based on neural networks, fuzzy logic, granular computing (Pedrycz et al., 2015b), etc. For generalization purposes, statistical meta-analysis will be adopted (Djokic et al., 2012).

The third line refers to model validation and refinement. Substantially, we will build a suitable experimental design and, around it, we will run our repeated experimentation with the goal of ensuring validity and generalizable models, along the lines of the work done in (Succi et al., 2001; Succi et al., 2003a; Succi et al., 2003b; Paulson et al., 2004; Rossi et al., 2006; Janes et al., 2006; Rossi et al., 2012b; Janes et al., 2013; Coman et al., 2014) and (Russo et al., 2015).

4.3 Infrastructure

Our infrastructure mainly consists of a non-invasive metrics collection system integrated with hardware devices collecting biometrics data. Note that our metrics collection system will collect various metrics encompassing metrics related to biometrics data of developers, metrics about developer activities performed during software development, metrics about software development process, and metrics about software artifacts. Our metrics collection system will also include software packages for statistical analysis that can be used to analyze collected data.

In fact, the metrics collection system opens a new door to research on various topics for which it is essential to collect credible data about developers and software artifacts they develop. Regarding our infrastructure, we plan apply the system in two major studies: **(1)** a holistic metrics collection system that can collect metrics related to biometrics data of developers, metrics about developer activities, software development process, and software artifacts, and **(2)** an initial evaluation of using our holistic metrics collection system for study of software development under stress-inducing circumstances.

4.4 User Studies and Experiments with Students and Developers

With user study with industry partners, we expect to identify common practices exercised by developers to deal with stresses in their workplaces. We plan to report new findings we expect to find to major software engineering conferences and workshops. Note that such findings will not only enable our research, but also can help other researchers investigate the issues on stresses of developers.

Based on the findings we obtain from the user study, we plan to investigate the actual effects of the practices exercised in the field to deal with stresses of developers. We also investigate the effects of these practices on performances and productivity of developers. For the sake of feasibility, we first plan to experiment with students of Innopolis University, and, based on the results we obtain, we also plan to perform similar experiments in industry partners.

5 CONCLUSION

Developing software systems is a knowledge intensive task, and as such is heavily influenced by the state of mind of developers. It has therefore historically been claimed that software has to be developed in a quiet and relaxed environment. However, this is hardly the case. Software is often produced under significant time constraint. Sometimes it even happens that patches for safety critical systems have to be released because one of such system is malfunctioning or not working at all with severe and even fatal consequences for its intended users. Notable examples for this include the aircraft and transportation industry and the overall energy industry.

The main idea presented in this paper is to understand the effects of various software development practices on the performance of developers working in stressful environments, and identify the best operating conditions for software developed under stressful conditions. We discussed the possible research agenda and provide our view on its implementation with the state of the art technologies and approaches.

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