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A Study On The Accumulation Of Technical Debt On Framework-based Web Applications

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an observational study to investigate the advantages of using widely used software development frameworks for Java EE applications. Also, it presents the accumulation of Technical Debt and the evolution of the quality code metrics, when the software is developed using frameworks. Considering that web applications hold the lion's share of today's IT industry, this study focuses on two widely popular Java EE frameworks, namely Spring Web MVC Framework and Apache Struts 2. In particular, we have developed one system over four versions in both frameworks while Technical Debt and quality code metrics have been monitored. The findings indicate that software developed based on frameworks is relatively free of Technical Debt. Moreover, we have not noticed any significant differences between the two frameworks in terms of Technical Debt. In general, one could claim that framework-based development can potentially lead to high quality and maintainable systems, if the framework is properly used.

1 Introduction

Technical Debt (TD), is a software engineering metaphor and has been coined by Ward Cunningham[Cun92] in 1992 as: *“Shipping first time code is like going into debt. A little debt speeds development so long as it is paid back promptly with a rewrite. Objects make the cost of this transaction tolerable. The danger occurs when the debt is not repaid. Every minute spent on not-quite-right code counts as interest on that debt. Entire engineering organizations can be brought to a stand-still under the debt load of an unconsolidated implementation, object-oriented or otherwise”*.

One way to build faster is to use a framework. A framework is a set of classes and libraries which have been written by other developers and the programmers can use them to create enterprise applications. Currently, there is a plethora of frameworks and the number is growing. The developer can gain several benefits from the usage of a framework such as: easier and faster software development, robust architecture and extendibility. The

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frameworks handle the infrastructure allowing the developer to focus on the business logic to be implemented. Proponents of frameworks claim that building software using frameworks results in higher quality code/products. This is happening because most of the frameworks are based on widely-acceptable design patterns.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the benefits that can be obtained by using widely available frameworks for web applications, with emphasis on applications that are developed in Java EE. The analysis focuses on the resulting software quality and Technical Debt.

2 Background Information

Although the research community has not agreed on a common way of assessing technical debt, there are some tools that provide TD estimates (such as the ones that implement the SQALE[Let12] method. SQALE is a generic and language independent method. SQALE stands for Software Quality Assessment based on Lifecycle Expectations and is delivered under a Creative Commons license. One of the most widely used tools for the calculation of the TD is the SonarQube[son] platform. The calculation of TD is based on rules and issues. For each rule there is an estimation of time that is required to fix the corresponding issue. The SonarQube sums the estimated time for each of the issues and calculates the Technical Debt in man-days.

3 Case Study Design

The present study aims at investigating the question: “Do frameworks help programmers develop good quality software in terms of metrics and TD”. The study aims to analyze software systems developed using Java EE frameworks for the purpose of measuring software quality with respect to the estimated TD and selected metric values, from the point of view of software researchers in the context of web application development. Moreover, the study investigates whether TD increases with the passage of versions.

In order to assess the benefits of framework-based development, we have developed two CRUD Java EE web applications with state-of-the-art technology. CRUD, is a term that is used in computer programming and stands for Create, Read, Update and Delete, tasks which are most often associated with the administration of a database. We have developed one application based on the Spring Web MVC Framework[Jo05] and the other one on Apache Struts 2[str]. Both applications have evolved over four versions. In each generation we were adding the same new features and functionality into the two applications.

To evaluate the quality of both systems that we have developed, we used the metric suite that Chidamber and Kemerer[CK94] proposed, which we augmented with a set of 2 other source code metrics that are complementary to them. Through metrics, project managers can have an overview about the evolution of the projects.

Moreover, we have used the SonarQube platform to calculate the Technical Debt of these projects. During the development of the two projects, we tried to follow as closely as possible the suggestions of the frameworks on how design and implementation should be carried out. In the final step of our observational study, we repaid the identified Technical Debt, measured the required time and compared the actual time with the time that SonarQube estimated that it would take us to repay the Technical Debt.

The application that we have developed simulates a simplified information system of a university and was developed incrementally in four versions, with increasing functionality. The functionality of the different versions is the following:

- v.1 The user of the application had the ability to retrieve general information about the university. For example, she could see the courses that are taught (name, description, ECTS credits and semester), the professors of the university (name, surname and contact number) and also which courses are taught by each professor. Finally, she was able to retrieve some general information about the secretaries of the university (name, surname and contact number).
- v.2 Authentication and role authorization was added to the project. Also, additional functionality allowed each of the users of the web site to update their personal details.
- v.3 Added new functionality for the secretaries allowing them to create, modify/update, delete, assign and remove courses to the professors of the university. Finally, the secretaries have the ability to modify/update the data of all users.
- v.4 The students that are logged into the system with their credentials, are able to update/modify their personal information, see the courses that they are enrolled in and the grades of the courses that they attended. Also,

they have the ability to enroll to new courses as well as be removed from the courses that they are already enrolled. If a professor logs into the application with hers credentials, she is able to update/modify her personal information and obtain a list with all students that are attending her courses and finally, she is able to assign grades to the students.

4 Results and Discussion

In this section we are going to discuss the results and the findings of our observational study. Firstly, we will discuss the metric results and then the Technical Debt for the two projects that we have built.

4.1 Source code metrics

As already mentioned the two Java EE projects have the same functionality and evolved over four versions. The goal was to investigate if the source code metrics will be the same or if there is a comparative advantage by using one of the frameworks. Figure 1 shows the charts of the six of the metrics that we calculated.

- Number Of Classes (NOC). The number of classes that exist in both projects is almost equal. This apparently is happening due to the fact that both projects have the same functionality. However, the project that was developed in Struts 2, has a smaller number of classes when we compare it with the Spring. Their minimum difference is 1 and the maximum is 5. The maximum difference, has happened because one of the Action classes of Struts 2, in Spring is broken into 3 classes. Moreover, in Spring we have implemented an additional class that had the role of wrapper. Finally, the Spring application has 2 extra classes, one to display the data to non-registered users and the other one to registered. In Struts 2 there is one class to handle these Actions. Struts 2, gives us the opportunity to use Pointcuts and Wildcard expressions for the management of requests.
- Lines Of Code (LOC). From the LOC chart we can see that the Struts 2 application has about one hundred lines of code less compared to that developed in Spring. This is in accordance to the lower number of classes.
- Weighted Methods Per Class (WMC). As we can see from WMPC1 chart this metric for the Spring application does not change during the evolution of the project. But for the Struts 2 application this metric is increasing during the evolution of the application. Struts 2 implements the pull-MVC (or MVC 2) so it requires getters and setters for the view to be able to retrieve the data. Each getter and setter method, is increasing the complexity by 1. This is the reason that the Struts 2 application has higher complexity.
- Coupling between Object Classes (CBO). From the Figure we can observe that the average coupling for the Struts is lower than that of Spring and also slightly increases from version to version. While for the Spring application there is a sizable increase from the second generation to the third and from there to the fourth. This happened because the Spring application has a larger number of classes. This had as a result an increase to the average coupling of the system.
- Response for a Class (RFC). The average value of the RFC metric for the project that is developed in Spring, remains nearly constant in all versions of the project. Only the third generation it increased by a unit, while the fourth version it returns to the baseline. On the other hand, the average value of the RFC for the Struts 2, is from the first version of the project 10 points higher when we compared with that of Spring and also observe that from generation to generation has an upward trend. This is happening due to the fact that Struts 2 has a significantly lower number of Action classes that should manage the same number of requests.
- Lack of Cohesion of Methods (LCOM). The average lack of cohesion in the project that is developed in Struts 2, is far higher than in Spring, but it remains constant in all versions of the project. The improved cohesion in Spring is probably due to the larger number of smaller classes which therefore tend to be more cohesive.

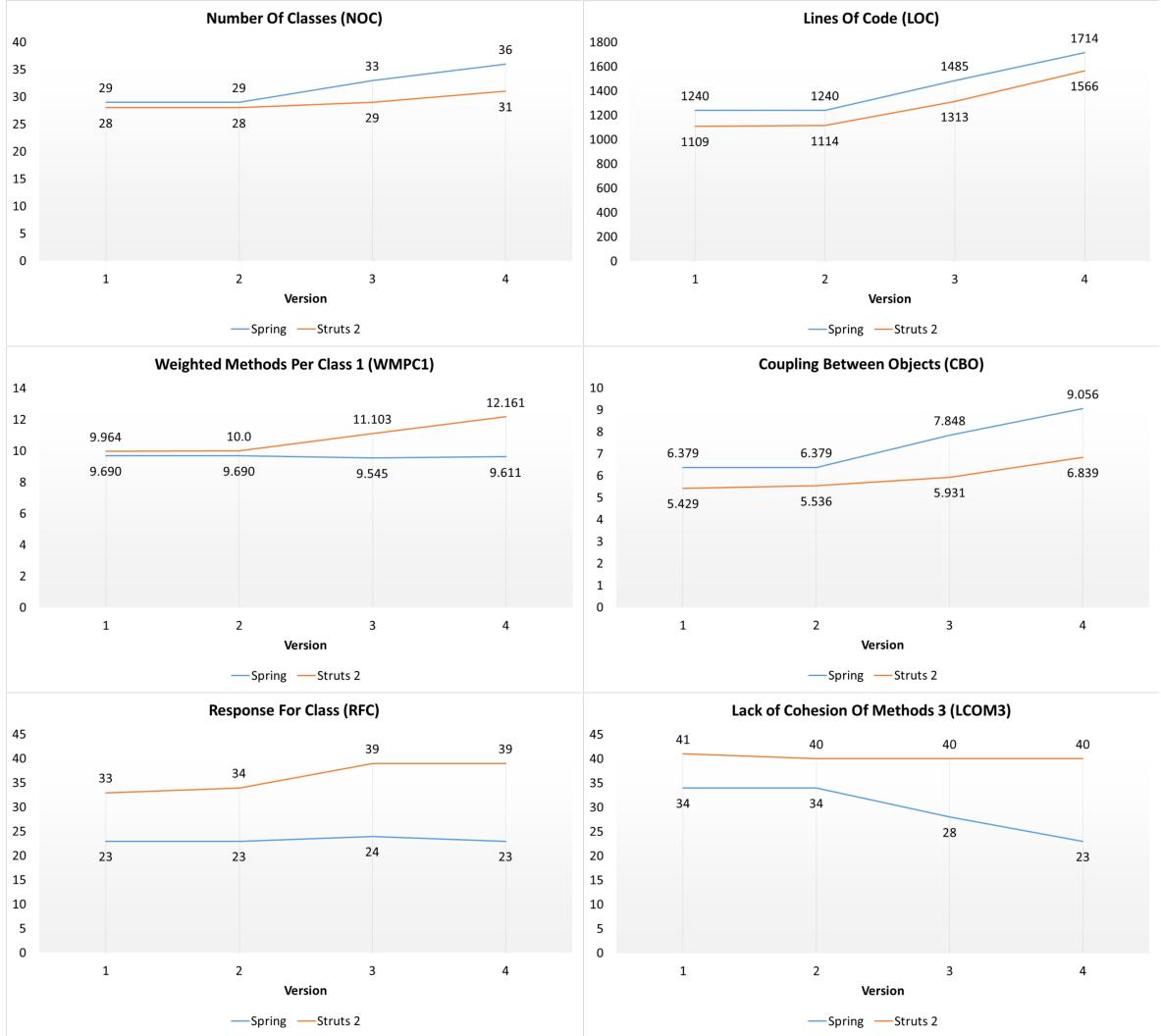


Figure 1: The evolution of a series of metrics over four versions of the two system implementations

4.2 Technical Debt Results

Table 1 summarizes the results concerning the technical debt of both systems along the four versions. As it can be observed, the accumulated technical debt is relatively low: the technical debt ratio (i.e. the estimated technical debt over the size of each application) does not exceed 1.5% for Spring and 2.7% for the Struts application and the corresponding SQALE rating is 'A'. For the Spring application no Blocker or Critical issues have been identified while for the Struts application a few critical issues have been identified. These issues mainly refer to the rule: *"Fields in a Serializable class must themselves be either Serializable or transient even if the class is never explicitly serialized or deserialized. That is because under load, most J2EE application frameworks flush objects to disk, and an allegedly Serializable object with non-transient, non-serializable data members could cause program crashes, and open the door to attackers"*. Each one of these issues increases the debt of the application by 30 minutes. Actually, we think that we should not count these issues as TD. These issues appeared due to the fact that it is a good practice for the Action classes (the Controllers) of a Struts application, to extend the ActionSupport class. The ActionSupport class implements the Serializable interface and this is the reason why the SonarQube counts them as issues.

Concerning the evolution of TD, the estimated effort to repay it and the TD ratio increase with the passage of versions. This should be mainly attributed to the fact that we are adding new features and functionality to our projects. In the final step of our exploratory study we repaid the TD and also we measured the time that took us to do the repayment. The actual time to resolve the reported issues was less than 2 hours. The time

is significantly lower than the SonarQube estimates. Our general belief is that no tremendous improvements in quality have been incurred by repaying the accumulated TD.

Table 1: SonarQube report for Spring and Struts 2 applications

Version	Spring 1	Spring 2	Spring 3	Spring 4	Struts 1	Struts 2	Struts 3	Struts 4
Lines of code	1375	1455	1765	2046	1296	1303	1517	1801
Functions	166	172	194	212	164	165	182	201
Classes	28	29	33	36	28	28	29	31
Duplicated lines (%)	1.9%	1.8%	2.3%	4.4%	2.0%	2.0%	2.9%	2.5%
Duplication Lines	38	38	72	124	38	38	64	64
Duplication Blocks	2	2	4	8	2	2	4	4
Complexity	195	201	225	248	193	194	214	240
Complexity/Function	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2
Complexity/Class	7.0	6.9	6.8	6.9	7.0	6.9	6.8	6.9
Issues	82	90	118	140	158	159	171	188
Blocker Issues	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Critical Issues	0	0	0	0	2	2	6	15
Major Issues	13	17	25	33	90	91	95	98
Minor Issues	62	66	86	100	59	59	63	68
Info Issues	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
Technical Debt	7h 54min	1d	1d 4h	1d 7h	1d 7h	2d	2d 3h	3d
Technical Debt Ratio	1.1%	1.2%	1.4%	1.5%	2.4%	2.5%	2.5%	2.7%
SQALE Rating	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A

5 Conclusions and Future Work

This study presents an exploratory study to seek the benefits of framework-based development on Java EE applications. The main finding of this work is that framework-based development does not lead to serious issues leading to a relatively low technical debt. Moreover, after repaying the TD no tremendous improvement to the quality of the software has been observed. Finally, the required effort for the repaying of TD was significantly lower than the corresponding estimates.

In terms of future work, it would be valuable to generalize this study by analyzing multiple projects and multiple types of data (i.e. source code metrics, issues, commits, etc). Framework-based development could be contrasted to non-framework-based applications to investigate if there is a significant difference between these two types of development.

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