REInDetector: A Framework for Knowledge-based Requirements Engineering

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ABSTRACT
Requirements engineering (RE) is a coordinated effort to allow clients, users, and software engineers to jointly formulate assumptions, constraints, and goals about a software solution. However, one of the most challenging aspects of RE is the detection of inconsistencies between requirements. To address this issue, we have developed REInDetector, a knowledge-based requirements engineering tool supporting automatic detection of a range of inconsistencies. It provides facilities to elicit, structure, and manage requirements with distinguished capabilities for capturing the domain knowledge and the semantics of requirements. This permits an automatic analysis of both consistency and realizability of requirements. REInDetector finds implicit consequences of explicit requirements and offers all stakeholders an additional means to identify problems in a more timely fashion than existing RE tools. In this paper, we describe the Description Logic used to capture requirements, the REInDetector tool, its support for inconsistency detection, and its efficacy as applied to several RE examples. An important feature of REInDetector is also its ability to generate comprehensive explanations to provide more insights into the detected inconsistencies.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
D.2.1 [Software Engineering]: Requirements/Specifications—tools; I.2.2 [Artificial Intelligence]: Automatic Programming—program verification; I.2.4 [Artificial Intelligence]: Knowledge Representation Formalisms and Methods—representation language

General Terms
Design, Languages, Verification

Keywords
Requirements Engineering, Consistency, Description Logic

1. INTRODUCTION
Inconsistencies between requirements create major challenges for all stakeholders of a software solution and they can materialize during or between different phases of software development [9]. Conflicts arising from ill-aligned requirements typically mandate removing or modifying some of them. Yet, these changes can directly affect utility and effectiveness of the resulting system and, hence, ultimately determine a project’s success. We thus require automated tool support to assist software engineers, clients, and users to make informed decisions regarding specific demands and their impact on the system design and functionality.

Requirements engineering is the process of discovering, documenting, and maintaining requirements for software solutions [14]. The key objective of these activities aims at establishing sound goals and constraints for the software system being planned and constructed. However, achieving this goal is hard. There have been numerous attempts to facilitate the elicitation of sound sets of requirements [2, 4, 6–8, 12, 15], but they lack or insufficiently support the creation and maintenance of domain knowledge and semantics of requirements that, in our view, provide the crucial elements for reliable and preferably automatic verification of, possibly hidden, requirement dependencies. Moreover, while Siegemund et al [13] propose to build an ontology to support the RE process, their focus is mainly on tracking the interactions among requirements (e.g., supporting, retracting, etc.) and the inconsistency detection is for identifying the conflicts between these interactions rather than between the requirements themselves.

Zave & Jackson [16] view requirements as optative concepts, whose understanding requires domain knowledge to help bridge between a stakeholder’s intuition and what is practically implementable in a system. The domain knowledge, which also contains rules and assumptions about the system’s operating environment, offers us a practical means to ensure consistency between competing objectives. Some types of requirement inconsistencies may not be detectable in the absence of such domain knowledge. Consider, for example, a scenario stipulating conflicting quality attributes for bitmaps in a graphical user interface. The requirements “the application must support bitmaps up to 1280x960 pixels” and “the size of an individual bitmap must not exceed 3MB” cannot be satisfied simultaneously in the presence of the domain knowledge that also includes the rule “bitmaps can require a color-depth of up to 24 bits per pixel.” Without the additional domain knowledge, we would not be able to observe the inherent conflict in the specification.

Moreover, reasoning about requirements typically mandates semantics of requirements [3]. They can be defined in terms of instances, concepts and roles. Concepts are collections of modeling artifacts (i.e., instances) and roles constitute the relationships between concepts. In knowledge representation, concepts and roles are defined abstractly in the domain-level knowledge base using specialization relationships [1]. For instance, in requirements specification, it is possible for several terms to refer to the same concept,
such as customer and client. It is critical that these concepts are formally defined to assist the RE process. Furthermore, relationships between concepts and instances must also be captured precisely for the purpose of requirements analysis. For example, consider two requirements regarding the languages supported in an enterprise-wide system, one states that “Chinese must be supported” and another says that “only major languages should be supported.” Then, the interaction (e.g., conflict) between the two requirements cannot be determined precisely without knowing about the relationship between Chinese and the concept of major languages (i.e., whether Chinese is one of the major languages).

As these types of reasoning are common in RE, we looked for a way to better capture it in an automated RE analysis tool. To this end, we identified Description Logic [1] as a suitable formalism, both expressive and usable by a wide range of RE stakeholders. In Description Logic, basic inference is subsumption (or concept inclusion). Together with domain knowledge and semantics of requirements encoded in an ontology, subsumption allows requirement engineers to unveil implicit consequences of explicit features occurring simultaneously in the requirements of a system.

2. THE FRAMEWORK

REInDetector is a Java application which provides a graphical user interface to perform all requirements elicitation, management, and validation tasks [15]. Our focus in REInDetector is on three particular objectives: a) define and maintain a knowledge base for requirements, b) provide an expressive and usable formalism for RE, and c) develop a knowledge-based RE framework to perform automated inconsistency and realizability analysis. We use Description Logic [1], a decidable subset of first-order logic commonly used as the formal basis of object/class-style ontologies, as the core for requirements formalization and analysis in REInDetector. Description Logic has been successfully applied to define various members of Web Ontology Languages (OWL) [5] and yields an attractive means to capture and maintain the domain knowledge and semantics of requirements and their corresponding relationships.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual overview of REInDetector. In REInDetector, we support a goal-oriented requirements engineering approach [15] that aims at improving the manageability of requirements and allow for effective traceability of the underlying rationales of inconsistent requirements, respectively. The Input Module takes and manages specifications from requirements engineers, including the specific requirements, their relationships and formalizations, domain knowledge, rules, and constraints. The corresponding data is pushed into the Knowledge Module in which it is interpreted and stored in an ontology of concepts, roles, and instances. The Reasoner Module provides analysis and reasoning services including inconsistency detection, requirements queries, and report generator.

We use Manchester OWL syntax (MOS) [10] as the requirements specification language. Manchester OWL syntax faithfully maps expressions in Description Logic. Moreover, MOS offers an easy means to the formalization of requirements (while preserving sufficient expressiveness) as it is close to natural language and much simpler than other languages such as LTL in KAOS [6] or Formal Tropos in Tropos [8]. Furthermore, by relying solely on Description Logic and MOS, we can utilize the off-the-shelf OWL reasoner Pellet [11] (with some extensions) to perform requirements queries, conflict detection and explanation services.

2.1 Input Module

The Requirement Elicitor enables one to capture a system’s functional and non-functional requirements and shows how they are related through refinement links. Graphically, elicited goals are denoted by AND/OR graphs in which each individual goal is represented as a node annotated according to the goal’s features. Each goal can be connected to other goals via refinement links (i.e., edges in the graph). A refinement link not only indicates how a goal is decomposed into sub-goals, which means how a goal can be satisfied, but also reveals its parent goal, which shows the rationale behind the goal. Refinement links can include AND-connectors to indicate minimal refinements (a goal can only be satisfied if all sub-goals linked to it via AND-connectors are satisfied), OR-connectors to signify alternative refinements (a goal being refined can be satisfied by fulfilling any of its OR-connected sub-goals), and Optional-connectors to mark optional refinements (sub-goals involved in Optional-connectors are the preferred options but not strictly required for the higher-level goal to be fulfilled).

Knowledge, semantics, rules, and constraints in the requirements domain can be defined using the Ontology Editor, which allows users to directly interact with the ontology. Both, the requirements and the ontology, need to be properly formalized in order to allow the effective analysis and reasoning on requirements. The syntax and semantics of the specification language are that of MOS, except the binary operator “SubClassOf” to represent requirements and the symbol “%” that we introduced to allow concepts to be defined within a requirement’s formalization. Requirements can consist of one or more sentences, each connected by “SubClassOf.” The expression on the right-hand side denotes the expectation or constraints for the captured concepts occurring on the left-hand side of “SubClassOf.” In other words, “SubClassOf” is a primary means to define subsumption in REInDetector.

Figure 2 illustrates the requirement elicitation in REInDetector.
on a security feature that will lock an account after three failed login attempts. The annotation contains a) the details of the goal including name, value, and type, and b) the relationships to other goals including the higher-level goal it refines, the associated refinement link, and all possible depended goals (i.e., “RefinedTo”).

2.2 Knowledge Module

The Knowledge Module consists of two components: Ontology Manager and MOS Parser. The Ontology Manager handles the problem domain ontology and is the heart of REInDetector. We use the domain ontology to capture requirement definitions and the semantics of concepts, rôles, and instances occurring in requirements.

The MOS Parser converts definitions into an internal representation. It receives its input from the Input Module (i.e., the formalizations of requirements and the domain rules and constraints) and extracts the corresponding concepts, rôles, and instances as well as their constraints and relationships. This information, in turn, becomes the input for the Ontology Manager, which will trigger an update of the underlying ontology. Figure 3 illustrates in more detail for the requirement “If a user makes 3 failed login attempts, then their account will be locked.” The MOS parser takes this input and maps it to a concept called UserWith3FailedLogins and associates the string %User AND hasLogins EXACTLY 3 FailedLogins% with its definition. In addition, we obtain two rôles, hasLogins and hasAccount, and the constraint that the User must have an account, which has been locked after three failed login attempts: UserWith3FailedLogins SubClassOf User AND hasAccount SOME LockedAccount. If necessary, the Ontology Editor allows for further, user-specific refinements of the ontology. All modification result in either an extended ontology or an updated one.

2.3 Reasoner Module

The Reasoner Module is in charge of requirements validation and causal analysis. It comprises two elements: the Reasoner that performs the automated detection of specification issues (i.e., requirements inconsistencies, redundancies, and overlaps) and the Explanation Generator that yields the causes (i.e., explanations) for the detected problems.

The Reasoner is based on Pellet [11], but also allows for the identification and explanation of redundancies and overlaps in requirements. These features are not supported in Pellet as of now. Moreover, we added a query facility to Reasoner in order to support the definition and proper handling of partial requirement specifications that can arise due to the cyclic nature of the requirements engineering process [14].

The Explanation Generator accepts “raw explanations” from the Reasoner and merges them with the internal requirement-constraint mappings in the ontology. As a result, we obtain a detailed report (i.e., problem descriptions) as to why a specific set of requirements has failed validation. Problems can relate to either misaligned demands or logical errors within requirements. The information contained in the reports allows all stakeholders to jointly develop suitable solutions to correct erroneous requirements.

3. TOOL EVALUATION

To test the effectiveness of REInDetector, we ran an analysis of approx. 100 requirements for a social networking system that aims at encouraging collaboration among staff in a multi-national company. We performed a controlled failure injection, that is, we constructed a number of non-trivial scenarios containing inconsistencies, redundancies, and overlaps in the original requirements set.

A sample run on an ill-formed set of security requirements is shown in Figure 4. The system needs to protect user account against unauthorized access. In case of tampering, the system will automatically lock an account after three failed login attempt. If this happens, the system has to issue a notice, either through SMS or email, to the user in order to the new account status. There are three possible scenarios:

- **F22_IfLockedThenEmail**: If an user account has been locked, then the user will receive an account locked notification email (UserWithLockedAccount SubClassOf User AND receiveEmail SOME AccLockedNotif).
- **F23_IfLockedThenSMS**: If an user account has been locked, then the user will receive an account locked notification SMS (UserWithLockedAccount SubClassOf User AND receiveSMS SOME AccLockedNotif).
- **F24_IfEmailThenNoSMS**: If the staff member receives account locked notification via email, the this user will not receive it in SMS also (StaffReceiveLockedNotifEmail %Staff AND receiveEmail SOME AccLockedNotif% SubClassOf Not (Staff AND receiveSMS SOME AccLockedNotif)).

Unfortunately, these requirements employ two different terms to denote the same domain concept: “user” and “staff.” Without considering the semantics and relationships between these terms, the inherent inconsistency of these requirements cannot be detected. With the use of the ontology, which captures semantics in the problem domain (i.e., “staff” and “user” are equivalent), REInDetector can reveal the problem as shown in Figure 4.

The corresponding explanations provide a rationale governing the problem. Depending on the security and notification preferences, there are two possible solutions to rectify the problem. First, we use the prefix F_XX as a goal counter for requirements.
if “security” is valued more than “cost effectiveness”, then a resolution is to remove F24_IfLockedThenNoSMS, which would allow the use of both communication channels and, hence, a possibly faster notification of the user (i.e., the user may not have access to email momentarily but to a smart phone or vice versa). Alternatively, we can remove either F22_IfLockedThenEmail or F23_IfLockedThenSMS, which would solve the issue also, but at the expense of “security.” The user may learn of the new account state only after they has checked the system-support notification system (i.e., either email or SMS). The stakeholders must make a decision here. REInDetector can assist them in this process.

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

REInDetector is a knowledge-based requirements engineering tool. It offers stakeholders an automated means to elicit, structure, and manage requirements. We use Description Logic (DL) to capture and reason about requirements as well as their constraints and relationships. DL belongs to a family of formal knowledge representation languages [1] that can effectively represent domain concepts. Artifacts (i.e., requirements, concepts, roles, and constraints) can be expressed in a quasi-natural form, a powerful tool that can assist all stakeholders in their endeavor to formulate sound sets of requirements for the software system being developed.

Requirements engineering is an iterative process. REInDetector can assist stakeholders in identifying the missing elements and conflicting (and possibly hidden) aspects in the requirements. Our framework encourages an incremental development approach that allows stakeholders to synchronize their assumptions and expectations. It offers a robust infrastructure to reason about requirements, even in the presence of incomplete information. Nevertheless, REInDetector is not able to detect the conflicts associated with the requirements that are not expressible in DL. However, this is expected due to the limited support for temporal operators in DL. Thus, a requirement such as “When a user chooses to show their online status, the user’s status button will always reflect the user’s availability on the system” can not presently be expressed in REInDetector. Hence, as a future extension of REInDetector, we seek to investigate additional constructors that would allow us to express temporal properties of the system being developed. Furthermore, we wish to explore additional abstraction mechanisms to address the varying needs of different stakeholders. REInDetector and a user guide are available at:


5. REFERENCES


