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Towards Separation of Concerns in Flow-Based Programming *

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Abstract

Flow-Based Programming (FBP) is a programming paradigm that models software systems as a directed graph of predefined processes which run asynchronously and exchange data through input and output ports. FBP decomposes software systems into a network of processes. However there are concerns in software systems which do not fit this dominant decomposition. In this paper, we address the cross-cutting-concerns in FBP by using some examples and propose an aspect-oriented extension to FBP.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.3.3 [programming languages]: specialized application languages

General Terms languages, design

Keywords separation of concerns, aspect-oriented, flow-based programming

1. Introduction

Flow-Based Programming was first introduced in the early 1970s by J. Paul Rodker Morrison [13] and it has become an active topic again in computing science recently [1, 3–6, 14].

FBP decomposes software systems into processes. However there are concerns in software systems which do not fit this dominant decomposition. In order to improve the modularity of FBP applications, we propose to extend FBP with an aspect-oriented [10] approach that introduces a set of new concepts and mechanisms to address cross-cutting concern modularization by some examples. Afterwards, we analyze the benefits of applying aspect-oriented techniques to FBP. Finally, we present the design and implementation of Aspect-Oriented Flow-Based Programming (AOFBP), an aspect-oriented extension to FBP, and illustrate through examples how it solves the deficiencies mentioned above.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Sect. 2 we provide a brief introduction to flow-based programming. In Sect. 3 we address cross-cutting issues in FBP by presenting some examples. In Sect. 4 we propose the design of AOFBP. In Sect. 5 we propose a prototype for AOFBP. In Sect. 6 we implement the cross-cutting examples within the proposed extension. In Sect. 7 we consider related work. And finally, Sect. 8 concludes the paper.

2. Flow-Based Programming

In the FBP development approach, an application is viewed as a network of processes which are running asynchronously and are communicating with each other by means of streams of structured data chunks, called Information Packets (IPs). The focus of FBP is on application data and its transformation.

As an example, we present a simple network of four processes in Fig. 1 which shows the main components of FBP networks. The rounded rectangles are instances of processes, which do not fit this dominant decomposition. In order to improve the modularity of FBP applications, we propose to extend FBP with an aspect-oriented [10] approach that introduces a set of new concepts and mechanisms to address cross-cutting concern modularization by some examples. Afterwards, we analyze the benefits of applying aspect-oriented techniques to FBP. Finally, we present the design and implementation of Aspect-Oriented Flow-Based Programming (AOFBP), an aspect-oriented extension to FBP, and illustrate through examples how it solves the deficiencies mentioned above.

The processes are connected together through their ports by means of connections that are presented as directed solid lines in the network. The connections can be seen as bounded buffers with fixed capacity in terms of the number of IPs they can hold at any time. An IP can only be owned by a single process or a connection between two processes at any point of time. IPs can be grouped together to compose a sequential pattern within a stream, called a substream, by sending a bracket IP, called a bracket IP, at the start and the end of the substream. These substreams can be nested or chained together to travel through a network as a single object [14].

The processes monitor the connections on their input ports. Once an IP becomes available on these connections, they will take the IPs, transform the data, and makes the results available to the output ports of the processes. This triggers the connected connections at the output ports and propagates the IPs within the network. If a connection becomes full, processes feeding it will be suspended. If a connection becomes empty the process attached to the connection will be suspended [14].
3. Cross-Cutting Problem in FBP

To motivate the need for mechanisms for cross-cutting modularity, we present some concerns whose implementation would benefit from such mechanisms as follows.

3.1 Logging

Logging of program actions is one of the well-known cross-cutting concerns in AOP. This is often useful when one wants to trace the execution of the processes on their entry or exit points.

Figure 2(a) presents an application modeled as a composite process which has three atomic processes; P1, P2 and P3 (P2 and P3 are child processes of the composite process in the network). In order to add the logging concern to this application and log the entry points of the processes, a logging process should be added to the entry point of each process and sub process in the application network. To this end, each atomic process P1, P2 and P3 should be replaced by a composite processes. These composite processes have a logging process and the related process in its network and are connected to the copy of the process inputs. A logging process should also be added to the entry point of each non-atomic process of the original network.

The extended version of the application, supporting this concern, is presented in Fig 2(b). This shows, that the implementation of the logging concern is scattered among the processes, and that this concern cannot be modularized as a single process.

3.2 Waste Management Modeling

The aim of waste management modeling is to analyze the waste flow and provide a life cycle assessment (LCA) of waste scenarios [17]. LCA is an approach for analysing environmental impacts related to a product, process, or service “from cradle to grave” — from the production of the raw materials to the final disposal as waste. To compute the LCA, first a life cycle inventory (LCI) is created. The LCI inspects every phase of the life-cycle. For each phase, the inputs (in terms of raw materials and energy) and outputs (in terms of emissions to air, water and as solid waste) are computed and are aggregated over the lifecycle. The LCA is then formed by converting the inputs and outputs from the LCI into their impacts on the environment. The sum of these impacts then represents the overall environmental effect of the lifecycle of a product or process.

The waste management system of, e.g., a city or municipality can be modeled as an FBP network of waste processes as shown in Fig 3(a). Each waste process can be either an atomic waste process or a composite waste process. In order to evaluate the LCA of a waste management system, the LCA of each atomic or composite processes are calculated and accumulated.

Figure 3(b) presents the extended version of the composite waste process illustrated in Fig. 3(a). In order to add an LCA computation to the waste process, each atomic process should be wrapped by a composite process, which utilizes an LCI process to calculate the LCA of the atomic process. Afterwards, an aggregator process should be added to each composite process to calculate the accumulated LCA, which should be exposed to the parent of the process as an LCA computation. This implementation of LCA computation is cross-cutting across the hierarchy of the waste processes and this concern cannot be modularized by FBP.

4. Extending FBP with Aspect-Oriented Concepts

FBP does not provide mechanisms for modularizing cross-cutting concerns. This deficiency leads to tangled and scattered process definitions. On the one hand, one process addresses several concerns. On the other hand, the implementation of a single concern is scattered through many places in the other process definitions. In this section, we propose to apply aspect-oriented concepts as a complementary mechanism to FBP and present the design and implementation of our aspect-oriented extension to FBP, which we call Aspect-Oriented Flow-Based Language (AOFBP).

4.1 Join Point Model and Pointcut Language

In AOFBP, join points are atomic or composite processes among the hierarchy of FBP networks.

The grammar of the pointcut language is presented in Grammar 1. The attributes of a process have been used as predicates to choose relevant join points. The proType designator is defined to refer to processes by matching process type. This designator takes a string argument, which provides the string pattern to match the type of
An advice in AOFBP is either an atomic process or a composite process which are executed at the join points specified by the desired pointcut. Modeling advices as processes improves the reusability of advices.
output ports of the process \((P)\) to the (atomic or composite) process defined for the related advice \((A)\), cf. Fig. 5(a). For an adapter advice, process \(P\) will be replaced by a composite process where the advice process \(A\) will be located before or after the process \(P\), according to the type of the advice. If the advice is the “around” advice, the composite process only contains the process \("A\), Fig. 5(b,c). The weaver applies the “collector” advices differently. It will add the advice process \(A\) to the context of the composite process at hand, and then it will build up connections from all the desired output ports of the child processes to the advice process, cf. Fig. 5(d).

After building up the composite process which is going to replace the process at hand, i.e. \(P\), and reconnecting all the related connections, the weaver will delegate the execution of the composite process to the scheduler of the FBP engine. This favours reuse and makes the implementation of the weaver simpler and easier.

The weaver handles the aspect ordering and aspect interaction problems as well. When several pieces of advice match the same process, the aspect weaver executes them in the following order: adapters, observers, collectors. Since the adapters can change the inputs and outputs of the process, they should be executed before the observers to make the changes visible for them. In the same way, adapters and observers can add ports to the process. Therefore they should be executed earlier to prepare these ports for the collectors.

If pieces of advice with the same type share a join point, they are assumed to be independent processes and execute concurrently. At the moment AOFBP does not support dependencies between aspects. We intend to extend AOFBP with constructs to support these types of dependencies.

5. Tool Support

AOFBP can be implemented as an extension for any FBP implementation such as JavaFBP, C#FBP, CppFBP, etc. As proof of concept, we have implemented AOC#FBP based on C#FBP to support the AOFBP concepts discussed in this paper.

The architecture of AOC#FBP is presented in Fig. 6. This architecture can be reused for other FBP engines as well. The implementation extends an FBP scheduler with an aspect weaver that builds a wrapper around the FBP scheduler. The scheduler calls the AOFBP weaver to check if there are any advices that can be applied to the process at hand. To this end, whenever the scheduler is going to initiate a process, it passes the meta-data of the current process to the aspect weaver. The weaver examines all the registered pointcuts to determine if there is any advice which should be applied on the process. Since the process will be initiated only once during their run-time life cycle, the adaptations will be applied only one time to the process.

5.1 AOC#FBP

In order to support aspects in FBP, a base class for aspects has been defined. This class provides all the required interfaces to define an aspect such as advice and pointcuts. The instances of this class will be loaded in the aspect repository of the AOFBP weaver. The weaver will examine this repository to match the pointcuts of these aspects with the meta-data of the current process.

In order to make the development of applications based on AOC#FBP easier for the developers, a language has been implemented to describe networks and aspects. As presented in Fig. 6, the network and the aspect files which are defined by this language will be compiled to the network and aspect objects that will be interpreted by the C#FBP scheduler and the AOC#FBP weaver.

5.1.1 Defining Networks

A network can be defined in AOC#FBP based on the syntax presented in Grammar 2. This syntax defines a network as a list of connections which are separated by ",". Each connection defines a flow from a specific port of a process expression to a specific port of another process expression. The ports are identified by their names. A process expression can be a process constructor to instantiate a new instance of a component or it can be a process reference to refer to a process instance defined earlier. The process constructor can have arguments to initialize the component as well. A connection can be used as a process expression to allow cascade definition of connections. A network can be used as a sub network (composite component) by assigning it a unique ComponentID. New networks are created as copies of this network by referring to this ID. In order to support sub network definition, the syntax provides means
to create input or output ports for the sub network as well. A port
constructor, which takes the type of the port, can be used alone
(without any process expression) on the left or right side of “->”
or in a connection statement to define input or output ports for the
network. A specific identifier called “this” is reserved to refer to
the network instance and its meta-data. This identifier can be used
in order to refer to the attributes and input and output ports of the
network. The syntax also allows us to forward data directly from
value expressions (such as constant values and process attributes)
to a specific port of a process or an output port of the network. A
special construct called “PortFilter” has been defined to connect
a set of ports of a process (or the network by using “this” as process),
which can be specified based on the name and the type of the ports,
to an array port \[14\] of a process or an output port of the network.

5.1.2 Defining Aspects

The aspect definition in AOC#FBP, includes specifying the pointcuts
and the related advice. The aspects can be defined by the syntax
Each statement can be either a pointcut or an advice definition. A
pointcut can be expressed by using the pointcut language defined
by Grammar[4] which supports all the designators proposed for
AOFBP. An advice can be defined by three constructs provided by
the grammar to define different kinds of advice.

Observer and advancing advice share the same syntax except the
keywords at the beginning of the advice definition. They can be
defined by an identifier, advice type (before, after and around), a
pointcut, and an advice body, which is a network and can be specified
by the syntax presented at Grammar[2] The advice definition has a
different syntax than the others, and it can be defined by an identifier,
pointcut, the advice body, and a list of “PortFilter” constructs. This list
specifies the set of the ports of the child processes that are
collected by the advice.

AOFBP advices can access different ports of the captured process
based on their type (before, after, and around). The before advice
can only access the input ports of the process. Their input and output
ports have the same name and type as the input ports of the process.
The after advice can only access the output ports of the process. It
input and output ports have the same name and type of the output
ports of the process. The around advice has the same ports as the
exposed process.

6. Examples

6.1 Logging

In this example, the logging aspect has been implemented in AOFBP.
To this end, a pointcut called “all_processes” has been defined to
specify the processes that should be logged. The pointcut selects
all the processes regardless what name and type they have or on
which level in the network they are located. An observer advice
has been defined to be applied to the processes exposed by the
pointcut. The advice utilizes a component called “Logger” to log the
information. The component has two arguments “name” and “type”,
which specify the name and type of the process to be logged, and it
also has one input port array called “arguments”. This is provided
to log all the values of the input ports of the process. The advice
defines a network by constructing an instance of the component and
providing the process name and type as the initialization parameters.
Finally, it connects all the input ports of the exposed processes to
the array port of the process called “arguments”.

Whenever a process that matches the pointcut is to be initialized,
the advice will create an instance of the Logger component and
initialize it with the proper parameters and connections. The logger
component logs the information as soon as the arguments port
receives data.

6.2 Life Cycle Assessment

The life cycle assessment for waste management processes has been
implemented as an aspect in AOFBP. In order to calculate the LCA
of a waste scenario, the LCA of each atomic process is calculated
first, afterwards, the total LCA of the scenario is calculated by
accumulating the LCA of these atomic processes. To this end, two
different types of advice have been proposed.

The first type of advice is an observer which calculates the LCA
of the atomic processes. The advice defines a network with a process
instance of a component called “LCComponent”. This component
computes the LCA of a process based on the name and type of
the process and the amount of the waste. The component loads the
information regarding the elementary exchanges and the emissions
to the environment of the process from an XML file by using the
name and type of the process as the key. Based on this information,
it calculates the LCA of the process for the specific amount of waste
which is provided through the array input port called “WASTE_IN”. The
LCA component sends the result to an output port called “LCA”.
The advice creates a new instance of the component and initializes
it with the name and type of the exposed process. Then it connects
all the waste input ports of the exposed process to the “WASTE_IN”
port. As the result, it forwards the LCA computation from the LCA
port of the component to an newly created port called “LCA”.

The other advice is a collector which calculates the total LCA of a
composite process. The advice collects the values of the LCA output
ports of its child processes and it uses an aggregation component
to accumulate the LCA values. Since it forwards the results to a
newly created output port called “LCA”, the advice will calculate recursively the LCA of the whole waste scenario.

7. Related Work
Several papers have been published in order to support the FBP concept [2][3][4]. The number of frameworks using FBP concepts has been growing steadily. For example DataStage from IBM, which is a tool for data transformation combining FBP with parallel processing [5]. Other FBP implementation are PyF [6], DSPatch [1], Pypes [5], and NoFlo [6].

At the moment none of the FBP implementations have addressed the cross-cutting-concerns and provided mechanisms to implement them. In the following, we mention related work to AOFBP which address separation of concerns in different contexts. FuseJ [16] considers aspects as components that demand special interaction with the base components. A container based wrapping mechanism provides separation of concerns in this model. AOF4BPEL [9] improves the modularity and increases the flexibility of Web Service composition. Its major focus is on crosscutting dynamic changes, i.e., changes that affect several processes and several activities within the same process. Composition Filters (CF) [7] provides separation of concerns for object-based systems. CF wraps the system objects with filters. Each filter has a filter type which defines the behavior to be executed when the filter accepts the message. Filters can delegate the messages to their internal or external objects. Filters are grouped in so-called filter modules. Superimposition selectors are used to indicate which filter modules should be applied to which objects in the system.

The pointcut model of AOFBP allows one to capture join points among process hierarchies, and its advice model can add new ports to the captured processes at join points. In addition, it supports the collector advice for composite processes. Furthermore, AOFBP does not allow the advice to change the flow of the network and exchange data directly between the processes inside the advice network with the other processes outside the advice network.

8. Conclusion
In this paper we addressed the cross-cutting concerns in FBP by providing some examples. Separation of concerns in FBP helps to improve the modularity and maintainability of FBP applications. To this end, we propose an aspect-oriented approach to FBP called AO4FBP to support aspect-oriented concepts in FBP.

We use the AspectJ approach to model join points in AOFBP because processes in an FBP network are atomic processes which have predefined interfaces (type, input ports, output ports). Unlike the method signatures in AspectJ, they are more stable. While this can reduce join point fragility [11], it does not help with type checking and aspect modularity. Therefore, we also considered newer approaches such as join point types and join point interfaces [12]. However, we found two difficulties: The first is selecting the desired child processes and their ports within a composite process for the collector advice. This creates a dependency from aspects to pointcuts. The second is, that AOFBP advice can modify the interface of the process at the join points and it also can have effects on the pointcuts, furthermore it makes static type checking difficult as well. These challenges in AOFBP and will be addressed in future work.

Based on a language to describe AOFBP networks and aspects as well, we presented a generic architecture for developing AOFBP extensions based on any FBP framework. As a prototype we developed AOC#FBP as an extension for C#FBP.

Although several FBP extensions (e.g. JavaFBP, C#FBP) are available to implement an FBP application in different programming languages (e.g. Java, C#), the existing AOP extensions such as AspectJ are not the right tools to address the crosscutting concerns in FBP. On the one hand, if the FBP developers use the existing AOP languages (like Aspect J), they have to define the join points and the advice for the specific FBP scheduler. This makes a tight dependency between the FBP application and the FBP extension, which is in contrast to language-independence and modularity of FBP. On the other hand, advice in AO4FBP are not function calls, but FBP processes, which run asynchronously. Therefore, the weaver initializes the advice processes (connections and ports) in the join points. Furthermore, FBP models applications at a higher level of abstraction, and the separation of concerns should be addressed in the same level.

At the moment, AO4FBP does not provide mechanism to change the data-flow of an FBP network. We plan to provide means to specify sub graphs of the processes in a network as join points and to add mechanisms for advices to substitute the subgraph with alternatives. This will allow us to support optimization concerns in FBP as well.

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