

Software Maintainability Improvement: Integrating Standards and Models

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Abstract

Software standards are highly recommended because they promise faster and more efficient ways for software development with proven techniques and standard notations. Designers who adopt standards like UML and design patterns to construct models and designs in the processes of development suffer from a lack of communication and integration of various models and designs. Also, the problem of implicit inconsistency caused by making changes to components of the models and designs will significantly increase the cost and error for the process of maintenance. In this paper, an XML-based unified model is proposed to solve the problems and to improve both software development and maintenance through unification and integration.

Keywords: software standards, software maintenance, UML, XML, model unification and integration.

1. Introduction

By involving deeper and deeper to the operations of modern businesses, software systems have been a dominant influence of successful businesses. As the growth of scales and contents of the software systems, most of those software systems have become too complex to be developed by individual efforts. Responding to that situation, the typical process of the software lifecycle, as shown in figure 1, and each of the phases should be proceeded by various working groups with different

methodologies. Software development usually involves teamwork and need good communication. However, without the restrictive enforcement of using common standards, most systems are developed in an ad hoc manner which makes software development difficult and costly.

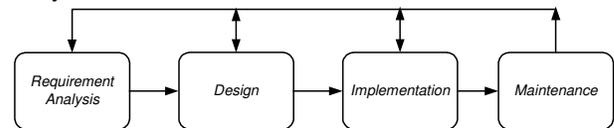


Figure 1. The typical process of the software life cycle

On the other hand, software systems should not only be more flexible and efficient in the process of development, but also they need to be more effective in the process of maintenance. Software maintenance is defined as the modification of a software product after delivery to correct faults, to improve performance or other attributes, or to adapt the product to a changed environment. In the early days of computing (1950s and early 1960s), software maintenance took up only a small part of the software life cycle. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, maintaining those old working software – called legacy systems – started to be recognized as a major activity of the software life cycle [1]. Up until now, the maintenance cost of these working systems has turned to be much higher compared to that of the initial development [3], and the cost of maintenance keeps growing faster since new software gets more and more complicated.

To deal with the demand of effective development,

software standards are highly recommended because they promise faster and more efficient ways for software development with proven techniques and standard notations. De facto standards, such as *Unified Modeling Language (UML)* [8] or *eXtensible Markup Modeling Language (XML)* [4], are used to reduce the overhead of software inner-communication during the software life cycle and to increase maintainability and reusability. Another de facto standard, *design patterns* [6] are reusable solutions to recurring problems that occur during software development [2]. From the perspective of improving software development, modern software standards do show their contributions. However, the way they work out a problem brings up several new problems.

1) These software standards usually only cover single or partial phases of the software process.

2) The software process consists of the whole software life cycle including requirement, design, implementation, testing, and maintenance phases.

3) The similar dilemma of the inconsistency will obsess the maintainers.

In this paper, we propose an XML-based meta-model to unify and integrate these well-accepted standards in order to improve maintainability of the software systems. A comparison and mapping of these standards will be presented. An XML-based unified model is proposed to unify and integrate models that are composed with various standards.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The related works are briefed in section 2; section 3 introduces the approach to improve software maintainability by unifying and integrating existing software standards; section 4 validates this approach with an example illustration; a conclusion will be given in section 5 lastly.

2. The Related Works

Software standards are introduced to improve software development. By using the standard notations and concrete designs provided from widely accepted standards, designers can successfully reduce the complexity of software development. However, various software standards used in different phase of software life cycle caused the inconsistent problems with different modeling specifications that lead to the difficulty of maintenance. In this section, related methodologies, software standards and studies are surveyed to disclose the problem itself, as well as some noteworthy efforts responding to that demand.

2.1. Object-Oriented Technology and UML

Object-oriented (OO) technology is a landmark of software engineering; it organizes data as objects in ways that “echo” how things appear, behave, and interact with each other in the real world. An object is identified by its individual characteristics and activities, and it plays a role as a reusable, self-operational component in a business information model. OO technologies greatly influence software development and maintenance through faster development, cost saving, and quality improvement [9]. Object-Oriented Analysis and Design (OOA/D) [3] follows the concept of OO technology and thus has become a major trend for methods of modern software development and system modeling. A sign of the maturity of OOA/D is the convergence of object-oriented modeling notations in the form of the Unified Modeling Language (UML) [8].

UML is used to specify, visualize, construct and document the artifacts of software systems. UML defines the following diagrams to build software models and to express important domain-related concepts: *use case diagrams*, *class diagrams*, *collaboration diagrams*, *component diagrams*, etc. UML allows the user to easily understand a system analysis or design through these diagrams as well as its widely accepted modeling notations.

2.2. Modeling Transfer and Verification

Current modeling techniques and standards offer explicit definitions and notations to support software development, but few of them have the capability to enable users to verify the completeness and consistency of their work while users shift to other techniques or standards that are needed in the next phases of software development. This leads to limited automation and inefficiency. Some researchers have dedicated their work to improve the situation. In the followings, we will consider three issues related to modeling transfer and verification: modeling understanding, automation, and modeling verification.

Modeling understanding is a technique that helps an engineer compare artifacts by summarizing where one artifact (such as a design) is consistent with and inconsistent with another artifact (such as source) [7]. Other works have developed a software reflection model technique to help engineers perform various software engineering tasks by exploiting – rather than removing – the connection between design and implementation [7]. Based on a similar concept, an engineer might use a reverse engineering system to derive a high-level model from the source code [10].

Although the studies of these three issues try to address the isolated problem of modeling information,

mostly they take care of the problems of models in some specified subjects or limited domains. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship of the standards along with their positions during the life cycle of software development. The notation \boxtimes expresses that there is a need for modeling transfer between successive phases/models in a specific standard; the notation \otimes points out the absence of consistency from one standard to the others.

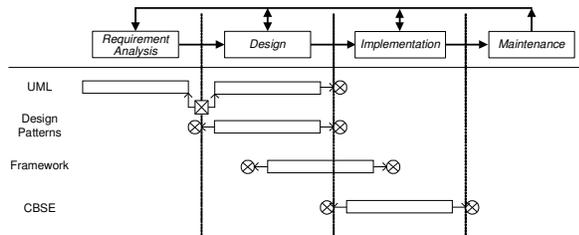


Figure 2. The relationship of some standards and the life cycle of software development

New standards will surely keep emerging for new requirements of software engineering. It is clear that modeling information expressed with a specific standard can only show part of the system information from its particular aspect. In this paper, we would rather propose a unified system model to integrate and coordinate various models in different standards with different phases of the software life cycle.

2.3. eXtensible Markup Modeling Language

XML [5] is a standard language supported by W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) with many useful features such as application neutrality (vender independence), user extensibility, ability to represent arbitrary and complex information, validation for data structure scheme, and human readability. XML provides the feasibility of the unification and formalization to different levels of concepts and representations of a system.

XML schema is a language which defines structure and constraints of the contents of XML documents. An XML schema consists of a set of type definitions and element declarations. These can be used to assess the validity of well-formed elements and attribute information items, and furthermore may specify augmentations to those items and their descendants.

3. The Approach to Unifying and Integrating Standards

In this paper, the *XML-based Unified Meta-Model*

(*XUMM*) is used to define the schema of an *XML-based Unified Model (XUM)* – the integration and unification of the modeling information from the adopted standard models, such as analysis and design models represented in UML, design patterns, framework, etc., in each phase of the software life cycle. To avoid confusion with the various uses of the term “model”, we refer in this paper to those models composed with a standard as “*submodels*” of our integrated, unified model. We call them submodels because each one characterizes the system partially, in the aspect of a specific phase. Through the transformation of XUMM, a submodel can be transformed into its corresponding XML representation, which we call a “*view*” of the XUM.

As shown in Figure 3, based on XUMM, submodels are unified, integrated, and represented as views of an XUM. Semantics in each submodel should be described explicitly and transferred precisely in XUM.

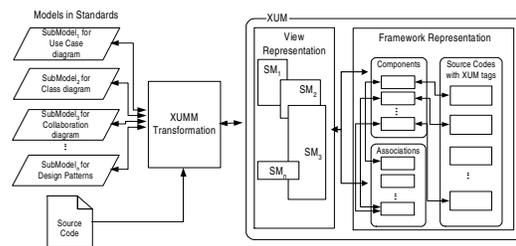


Figure 3. The unification and integration of models into XUM

In our approach, an XUM is employed to facilitate the following tasks:

- 1) The capturing of modeling information of models and transforming into views of XUM.
- 2) The two-way mapping of modeling information among models and XUM views.
- 3) The integration and unification of modeling information of different views in XUM.
- 4) The support of systematic manipulation.
- 5) Assisting the consistency checking of views represented in XUM.
- 6) The reflection of changes of view information in XUM to models in each phase.

The details of XUMM as well as XUM will be discussed in the following sections.

3.1. XML-based Unified Meta-Model (XUMM)

Figure 4 shows the relationship of views in XUM. The major merits of XUM are (1) the modeling information used in models (views) of each phase of the software life cycle and (2) the interaction and relationship of models (views). Both are explicitly defined and represented in XUM.

The relationship of the XUMM with an XUM is like the DTD with an XML document. XUMM defines the schema (definitions) of an XUM. Three kinds of *elements* defined in XUMM are used to describe the constitution of an XUM; they are *component*, *association*, and *unification relation*. Any object in an XUM is identified as a component. Components and associations are used to describe the semantic information of model objects and their relationships respectively. The third kind of element, unification relation, is used to describe the relationship of different views.

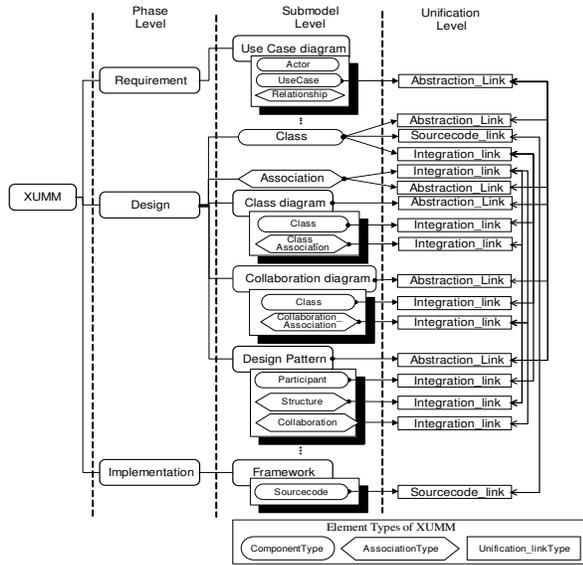


Figure 4. The relationship among views in XUM

According to the three kinds of elements, three primitive schemas are defined in XUMM respectively – *ComponentType*, *AssociationType*, and *Unification_linkType*. The *ComponentType* schema defines the necessary modeling semantic information and the types that are used to describe components in our unified model.

The *AssociationType* schema defines the necessary information and the types that are used to describe the relationships of components.

In order to show the relationship of the integration and unification of views in XUM, *Unification_linkType* is defined. *Unification_linkType* schema defines the hyperlink relations between elements in an XUM using a set of xlinks.

Based on the purposes of *Unification_linkType*, three types of links are defined further – *Integration_link*, *Abstraction_link* and *Sourcecode_link*. The *Integration_link* is used to link a set of components and/or associations that have the same semantics but may be named or represented differently in different views. The *Abstraction_link* is used to link a component/ association

to a view. The view consists of a set of components and their associations; it also represents the details of a specific component at a lower level of abstraction. And the *Sourcecode_link* is used to link a component to its corresponding source code.

Based on the integration, abstraction and sourcecode links, the submodels – adopting various standards that might share some semantics but were not explicitly represented – can be integrated and unified in XUM. Therefore, when a submodel (view) gets changed, the changes can be reflected to other related submodels (views).

Each submodel has its corresponding XUM representation, the view, and its schema is defined in XUMM. Following the transformation of XUMM, transforming modeling information of a submodel into a view of the XUM is not a difficult task. Due to the space limitation, we only show the its mapping rules in Table 1.

Table 1. Mapping of model elements and XUM elements

Models /Standards	Model elements	XUM element Representations
UML Use Case diagram	Actor	<Actor>
	Use Case	<Usecase>
	Association	<Relationship type="association">
	Generalization	<Relationship type="generalization">
	Extend	<Relationship type="extend">
	Include	<Relationship type="include">
UML Class, Collaboration, Sequence diagram	Class	<Class>
	Attribute	<Attribute>
	Operation	<Operation>
	Interface	<Interface>
	Parameter	<Parameter>
	Association	<Class_Association type="association">
	Composition	<Class_Association type="composition">
	Generalization	<Class_Association type="generalization">
	Dependency	<Class_Association type="dependency">
	Message	<Message>
Design Patterns	Participants	<Participants>
	Structure	<Structure>
	Collaborations	<Collaboration>

3.2. XML-based Unified Model (XUM)

An XML-based Unified model (XUM) is the representation of artifacts of software systems defined in XUMM. These artifacts are the modeling information collected from models of standards used in each phase of the software life cycle. Firstly, each submodel is transformed and represented as a view in XUM. The semantics of submodels are explicitly captured and represented in views of XUM. Secondly, the artifacts of views are integrated and unified into XUM.

Lastly, the manipulation of views of XUM is through

XML's published interfaces based on the Document Object Model (DOM), i.e. DOM is the internal representation of XUM. Therefore, the systematic manipulation of XUM can be accomplished through the manipulation on DOM of XUM.

The unification link plays a very important role in tracking the related elements that reside in different views. These related elements may have abstraction relations, which are linked by `abstraction_links`. The views that share the same elements are linked by `integration_links`. The components in views that are related to source codes are linked by `sourcecode_links`. Based on these links, if any information in each view or any source code gets changed, the affected views can be reflected by following the links.

During software maintenance, modification to any submodel should be detected and reflect the impacts on the related submodels, so the semantics in each model can be updated appropriately according to the modification. Therefore, the consistency checking of modeling information of views can be assisted. Besides, the impact analysis can be applied to the entire software system, including the impact on related source codes, the impact on related design information, and the impact on related requirement information.

4. An Example

In this section, to demonstrate the feasibility of our XUM approach, we have prepared the following example: the development and maintenance of a library subsystem – a book loaning management software.

4.1. Deriving XUM from the Process of Software Development

The class diagram, collaboration diagram, and design pattern diagram are created during the design phase. Figure 5 shows the class diagram, while Figure 6a and Figure 6b show the partial XUM representation of used classes and associations in Figure 5 respectively, and Figure 6c shows the XUM representation of the class diagram.

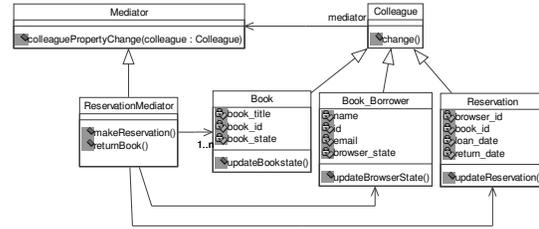


Figure 5. The class diagram of the system

```
<Class name="Mediator">
  <Integration_link xlink:label="D_Mediator"
xlink:title="Class of Mediator"/>
  <Sourcecode_link xlink:from="D_Mediator"
xlink:to="S_Mediator"/>
  <Operation
name="colleaguePropertyChange (colleague:Colleague)"
attribute="public" />
</Class>
...
</Class>
<Association from="Mediator"
to="ReservationMediator">
  <Intgration_link
xlink:label="Mediator_ReservationMediator"
xlink:title="Association:
Mediator_ReservationMediator"/>
</Association>
...
</Association>
```

Figure 6a. The XUM representation of classes

```
<Association from="Mediator"
to="ReservationMediator">
  <Intgration_link
xlink:label="Mediator_ReservationMediator"
xlink:title="Association:
Mediator_ReservationMediator"/>
</Association>
...
</Association>
```

Figure 6b. The XUM representation of associations

```
<Class_Diagram>
<Class name="Mediator">
  <Integration_link xlink:href="D_Mediator"/>
<Class name="ReservationMediator">
  ...
<Class name="Book">
  ...
<Class_Association from="Mediator" to="Reservation
Mediator" type="generalization" client="1">
  <Integration_link xlink:title="Mediator_
ReservationMediator" xlink:label=" Association
of Mediator_
ReservationMediator"
xlink:href="Mediator_ReservationMediator"
xlink:from="D_Mediator" xlink:to="D_
ReservationMediator" />
<Class_Association from="ReservationMediator"
to="Reservation" type="dependency"
client="0..n">
  ...
</Class_Diagram>
```

Figure 6c. The XUM specification of class diagram

There are four arguments that need to be discussed further in this case study. First, the way to capture modeling information from submodels and then transform them into view representations in an XUM is quite

systematic and straight forward as long as the mapping rules between two representations are well-defined in XUMM.

Second, beside the transformation from a submodel to a view, since the standards are widely accepted for modeling understanding, it is necessary to keep the two-way mapping in an XUM between the submodels and their views in order to project a standard model as needed.

Third, as shown in the XUM representation in previous figures, the unification_links such as Integration_link, Abstraction_link, and Sourcecode_link are used to link the components and associations that share some semantic information.

Fourth, when modeling information is not complete, some of the unification_links may be undefined. However, these undefined links are very valuable indications to software engineers, for they indicate that the system is in a situation of incompleteness, so some enhancements are needed.

4.2. Applying XUM to Improve Software Maintenance

One of the major difficulties in software maintenance is the maintenance of consistency of various documents, including requirement documents, design documents, comments in source codes, and source codes themselves. XUM maintains the links and semantics of related submodels which are represented in standard models and notations or documents. The consistency of these related documents can be enhanced through XUM, which then significantly help improve software maintainability.

5. Conclusion

Software standards, such as UML and design pattern, are supposed to offer standard notations or proven techniques for faster and more efficient model constructions for software development. However, none of the standards are general enough to cover all the phases of the software life cycle, and few of them employ compatibility with the others. So, using these isolated standards will cause the problems of integration and consistency of the standards, and especially the more serious problems of maintenance while doing necessary

alteration in models of a system.

In this paper, we have proposed an XML-based unified model, called XUM, which can integrate and unify a set of submodels with well-accepted standards of a system into a unified model represented in XML; through the unification and formal representation, XUM can not only assist software development, but also improve software maintenance. The feasibility of the approach has been verified through a set of experiments.

In our future studies, XUM and XUMM will be extended to embrace all the materials of modeling, design, implementation, and documentation for a system. Further experiments for a comprehensive XUM environment and the tool sets are being carried out to accomplish the goal of the enhancement and unification of software development and software maintenance.

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