



HAL
open science

Towards the Quality Improvement of Cross-Platform Mobile Applications

Matias Martinez, Sylvain Lecomte

► **To cite this version:**

Matias Martinez, Sylvain Lecomte. Towards the Quality Improvement of Cross-Platform Mobile Applications. IEEE/ACM 4th International Conference on Mobile Software Engineering and Systems (MOBILESoft), May 2017, Buenos Aires, Argentina. pp.184-188, 10.1109/MOBILESoft.2017.30. hal-03388377

HAL Id: hal-03388377

<https://uphf.hal.science/hal-03388377v1>

Submitted on 25 Apr 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Towards the quality improvement of cross-platform mobile applications

Matias Martinez, Sylvain Lecomte
Univ Lille Nord de France, F-59000 Lille, France,
Université de Valenciennes et du Hainaut Cambrésis,
Laboratoire LAMIH - UMR CNRS 8201
59313 Valenciennes Cedex 9
nom.prenom@univ-valenciennes.fr

Abstract—During last ten years, the number of smartphones and mobile applications has been constantly growing. Android, iOS and Windows Mobile are three mobile platforms that cover almost all smartphones in the world in 2017. Developing a mobile app involves first to choose the platforms the app will run, and then to develop specific solutions (i.e., native apps) for each chosen platform using platform-related toolkits such as Android SDK. A *cross-platform mobile application* is an app that runs on two or more mobile platforms. Several frameworks have been proposed to simplify the development of cross-platform mobile applications and to reduce development and maintenance costs. They are called *cross-platform mobile app development frameworks*. However, to our knowledge, the life-cycle and the quality of cross-platforms mobile applications built using those frameworks have not been studied in depth. Our main goal is to first study the processes of development and maintenance of mobile applications built using cross-platform mobile app development frameworks, focusing particularly on the bug-fixing activity. Then, we aim at defining tools for automated repairing bugs from cross-platform mobile applications.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Context

Studies estimate that currently in 2017, there are 2 billions smartphones in the world¹ and this number will increase 50% the next 5 years. Smartphones are mobile devices that run software applications such as games, social network (Facebook, Twitter) and banking apps. A *native mobile application* is an app built to run in a particular mobile platform. Currently, there are three platforms that dominate the smartphone market: Android (from Google), iOS (from Apple) and Windows Mobile (from Microsoft). A large number of applications that run on those platforms are available in application stores. For instance, Google Play, the official app store of Android applications, has more than 2 millions apps available to download.

A *cross-platform mobile application* is an application that targets more than one mobile platform. A manner of building this kind of apps is, for example, to develop a *native* application created for running on Android devices (built using Java technology) and another *native* application built (using Objective-C language) for iOS devices.

A current challenge for business enterprises, software companies, and independent mobile developers is to choose the target platforms for their mobile applications. To cover a large number of users, companies and developers aim at releasing their mobile apps on the three mentioned platforms. More platforms targeted involves to potentially reach more users and, thus, to increase the impact on the market.

However, nowadays, creating a cross-platform application as we mentioned, implies the development of one native application for each platform to target. Thus, companies have to afford the cost of two or more development processes of their cross-platform apps. It has a monetary impact and also affects the project organization: e.g., a company must find specialized developers for targeting each platform, the development duration for each platform could be different and it could exist technical limitations and differences between platforms, such as permission policies.

B. Cross-platform mobile app development frameworks

During last years, researches and industry sectors have both focused on proposing solutions for developing mobile applications to overcome the mentioned problematic. One of the main objectives of those solutions is to reduce the cost and time of developing and maintaining mobile applications.

From the academic research community, Perchat et al. [22, 23] proposed a framework that allows the integration of cross-platform components in any application (iOS, Android), with the goal of soften the difference between each mobile platform. Le Goer et al. proposed Xmob [11], a technology-neutral domain-specific language (DSL) intended to be cross-compiled to produce native code for a variety of platforms.

From the industry side, Phonegap (a.k.a. Apache Cordova)² from Adobe is a frameworks to build mobile applications using CSS3, HTML5, and JavaScript source code. The code is embedded on a skeleton native app, which interprets and executes the app code on the specific device. This kind of applications are called *Hybrid mobile applications* due they are conformed by both native (e.g., Java for the Android skeleton) and not-native (e.g., HTML) code.

¹<https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide/>²<https://cordova.apache.org>

Another cross-platform mobile app development framework is Xamarin³. It makes it possible to do native Android, iOS and Windows development in C#. Developers re-use their existing C# code, and share significant code across device platforms. For example, Evolve⁴ a conference event management app, was developed using Xamarin and is around 15,000 lines of code: the iOS version contains 93% shared code i.e., C# (the remain 7% iOS specific code) and the Android version contains 90% shared code.⁵ Sharing code means to reduce both develop and maintenance cost. Frameworks as Xamarin or React-Native⁶ are know as *Cross-compiled approaches*: their receive as input an application written in a particular not-native programming language and transform it to a native code for a particular mobile platform.

In this section we have listed some cross-platform mobile app development frameworks, but mobile developers can find many more options according to their needs.

C. Developing cross-platform mobile apps

Cross-platform development frameworks are built for saving development effort and money, and for making more agile the development process by having a single team building the whole solution. Researches have conducted different studies about cross-platform development frameworks such as comparison between them [3, 5, 6, 9, 19] or with web based mobile apps [1]. However, to our knowledge, no previous studies have investigated the problematic and challenges of *maintain* cross-platform mobile apps built using those frameworks.

D. Our research objectives

Our main goal is to study the quality of cross-platform mobile apps built using *cross-compiled frameworks* such as Xamarin or React-Native. We envision studying how developers build and maintain cross-platform mobile applications built using those frameworks, and how bugs are fixed during the application life-cycle. Moreover, we aim at defining a new generation of automated repair approaches for repairing bugs on cross-platform applications.

To our knowledge, this research would be the first at studying and understanding the development, maintenance and automated repair processes of cross-platforms mobile applications. We consider our research will have a strong impact on the industry of software development, specially for mobile development companies which base their business model on the development of cross-platform apps.

II. CASE STUDY: HISTORY OF FACEBOOK MOBILE APPLICATION

In this section, we present a case study that summarizes the different strategies adopted by Facebook developers to build the Facebook mobile apps.

³<https://www.xamarin.com>

⁴<https://github.com/xamarinhq/app-evolve>

⁵<https://goo.gl/eqj1ml>

⁶<https://facebook.github.io/react-native>

In 2009, the engineer team of Facebook has built the first mobile application of Facebook using an hybrid approach: a web-based application (i.e., HTML5 technologies) wrapped on native platforms code such as iOS and Android. By those days, the Facebooks engineers highlighted that this development approach let them leverage much of the same code for iOS, Android, and the mobile web. Furthermore, the approach also allowed them to iterate on experiences quickly by launching and testing new features without having to release new versions of the apps [4]. However, over time, the Facebook engineers realized that users had more expectations in terms of speed and user experience [10]. For those reasons, they decided to re-write from scratch the native Facebook app for iOS, and later the native app for Android platform. Unfortunately, the engineers rapidly realized that recompiling on every code change was slow, and separate sets of skills were needed to build for iOS and Android, having as consequence a slower product development and an increase of development costs [4].

In 2015, the adoption of Reach Native framework brings the engineer team the possibility to overcome those limitations. React Native is a *learn-once-run-everywhere* app development tool, started as a hackathon project in 2013. In a nutshell, React-Native allows developers to write components in JavaScript language, which are converted to native components for iOS and Android platforms. Nowadays, Facebook, Instagram and Airbnb are examples of cross-platform mobile apps developed using React-Native⁷.

This brief story shows that the development of cross-platform mobile apps is a challenge, even for one of the most valuable companies in the world.

III. LONG-TERM RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this section we propose three objectives for understanding and improving quality of mobile applications. We focus on studying application developed using cross-platform mobile development frameworks, particular on Xamarin and React-Native, maintained by Microsoft and Facebook, respectively. We choose those two frameworks due to they are open-source and well-documented (manuals, forums and white-papers).

A. Studying development of cross-platform apps

First, we plan to compare the processes of developing cross-platforms using *Cross-compiled development frameworks* with respect to the development of native apps using tools for that propose (Xcode, Android Studio). For instance, we plan to study the learning curve of those frameworks. Then, we plan to study how a framework manages the differences between platforms and how those differences impact on the app development and on the app's capabilities. Finally, we plan to study whether the use of those frameworks helps, as it is expected, to have faster time-to-market, increase component reuse, decrease cost, etc. Those research goals focus on the *development phase* of applications. The next two manly focus on the *maintenance phase*.

⁷<https://facebook.github.io/react-native/showcase.html>

C. Automated repair bugs of mobile apps

Recent years, researchers have proposed approaches for automatically repair bugs such as [8, 18, 24]. *Test-based repair repair approaches* [8] use test suite as correctness oracles, i.e., they are used as proxies of the program specification. In a nutshell, those approaches receive as input a buggy program p and its test suite ts , which has, at least, one failing test case (due to the presence of the bug). The approaches produce, when it is possible, a modified version of p which passes all tests from the suite ts . Each repair approach applies a set of *repair actions*, which are source code changes done to create a candidate repair.

Our goal is to define a platform for repairing functional bugs from mobile apps built with Xamarin. The platform will re-implement state-of-the-art repair techniques. For instance, to re-implement the approach GenProg [8] (which the original implementation targets C code) we need: 1) a tool for parsing source code of the buggy mobile app; 2) a tool for manipulating and transforming the parsed code for synthesizing the candidate repair; 3) a *correctness oracle* (e.g., test suites) which decides if a candidate repair is correct or incorrect.

We have already implemented GenProg for repairing Java code [17]. There, we used the tool Spoon [21] for parsing and manipulating source code, and JUnit framework¹⁵ for running the test suite from the program to repair. To implement a version of GenProg for repairing buggy mobile apps built with Xamarin, we could use, for instance, Roslyn¹⁶, an open-source C# compilers with rich code analysis APIs. Then, for validating correctness of candidate repairs, as for all *test-based repair approaches*, the repair approach needs a test-suite related to the buggy mobile application. Xamarin provides a testing framework called Xamarin.UITest¹⁷ that allows programmers to write and execute tests in C# and NUnit for validating the functionality of iOS and Android Apps. So, our implementation would need to execute those test cases for validating candidate repairs.

V. RELATED WORK

Cross-platform mobile app development

frameworks: In addition to open-source development frameworks such as PhoneGap, Xamarin and React-Native, academic researchers [11, 22, 23] proposed solutions with the goal of simplify the development of cross-platforms applications.

There are several works that classify, compare and evaluate cross-platform mobile application development tools [3, 5, 6, 9, 19] to build hybrid mobile and native apps. Our goal is to empirically study the life-cycle of mobile apps built using some of those tools, such as Xamarin or React-Native.

Empirical studies of Cross-platforms mobile apps:

Ciman et al. [2] analyzed the energy consumption of mobile development. Their results showed the adoption of cross-platform frameworks as development tools always implies an

increase in energy consumption, even if the final application is a real native application.

Hybrid mobile apps: Malavolta et al. [12] have focused on analyzing hybrid mobile apps (e.g., those that uses PhoneGap) available on the app store Google Play and their meta-data (i.e., user ranking and reviews). One of their finding is that the average of end users ratings for both hybrid and native apps are similar (3.75 and 3.35 (out of 5), respectively).

Mining repositories: Previous works such as [16, 20] have studied and classified bug fix from open-source project repositories. Our goal is to carry out similar experiments but focusing on repositories of mobile apps.

Automated software repair: During last ten years several approaches have been proposed to repair C bugs such as [8] or Java bugs such as [24]. The buggy programs that conform evaluation benchmarks are typically libraries or command-line (console) applications.

VI. THREATS TO VALIDITY

In this section we list possible threats to our research. One thread is to not find ‘meaningful’ open-source mobile app projects for creating the evaluation corpus. We are interested in mobile apps a) with an large number of commits to study and characterize how developers build and maintain applications. b) that use diverse components and functionalities from the underlying platform. Another thread is the impossibility to find meaningful and frequent bugs from issue tracking systems, bug reports, commits, wikis, etc. Finally, state-of-the-art repair approaches need correctness oracles such as test suite for validating candidate patches. A thread facing repairing mobile apps is to not find open-source project containing (good quality) test suite. This issue does actually affect the whole automated repair discipline [15].

VII. CONCLUSION

The development and maintenance of cross-platform mobile apps have particular challenges, different from those related to desktop or web apps. *Cross-platform mobile app development frameworks* have emerged with the goal of simplify the development of cross-platform mobile apps, reduce the development, maintenance costs and the time-to-market of the apps. Our research focuses on understand the maintenance process of those apps with the goal of producing tools for improving the quality of mobile applications.

Acknowledge: The ELSAT2020 project is co-financed by the European Union with the European Regional Development Fund, the French state and the Hauts de France Region Council.

REFERENCES

- [1] Andre Charland and Brian Leroux. Mobile application development: web vs. native. *Communications of the ACM*, 54(5):49–53, 2011.
- [2] Matteo Ciman and Ombretta Gaggi. An empirical analysis of energy consumption of cross-platform frameworks

¹⁵<http://junit.org/junit4/>

¹⁶<https://github.com/dotnet/roslyn>

¹⁷<https://developer.xamarin.com/guides/testcloud/uitest/>

- for mobile development. *Pervasive and Mobile Computing*, pages –, 2016.
- [3] Isabelle Dalmasso, Soumya Kanti Datta, Christian Bonnet, and Navid Nikaein. Survey, comparison and evaluation of cross platform mobile application development tools. In *2013 9th International Wireless Communications and Mobile Computing Conference (IWCMC)*, pages 323–328. IEEE, 2013.
- [4] Jonathan Dann. Under the hood: Rebuilding facebook for ios. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-engineering/under-the-hood-rebuilding-facebook-for-ios/10151036091753920/>, 2016. Online;.
- [5] Heiko Desruelle, John Lyle, Simon Isenberg, and Frank Gielen. On the challenges of building a web-based ubiquitous application platform. In *Proceedings of the 2012 ACM Conference on Ubiquitous Computing*, pages 733–736. ACM, 2012.
- [6] Rita Francese, Michele Risi, Genoveffa Tortora, and Giuseppe Scanniello. Supporting the development of multi-platform mobile applications. In *2013 15th IEEE International Symposium on Web Systems Evolution (WSE)*, pages 87–90. IEEE, 2013.
- [7] M. Gomez, M. Martinez, M. Monperrus, and R. Rouvoy. When app stores listen to the crowd to fight bugs in the wild. In *2015 IEEE/ACM 37th IEEE International Conference on Software Engineering*, volume 2, pages 567–570, May 2015.
- [8] Claire Le Goues, ThanhVu Nguyen, Stephanie Forrest, and Westley Weimer. Genprog: A generic method for automatic software repair. *IEEE Trans. Software Eng.*, 38(1):54–72, 2012.
- [9] Henning Heitkötter, Sebastian Hanschke, and Tim A Majchrzak. Evaluating cross-platform development approaches for mobile applications. In *International Conference on Web Information Systems and Technologies*, pages 120–138. Springer, 2012.
- [10] Martin Konicek. React native: A year in review. <https://code.facebook.com/posts/597378980427792/react-native-a-year-in-review/>, 2016. Online;.
- [11] Olivier Le Goer and Sacha Waltham. Yet another dsl for cross-platforms mobile development. In *Proceedings of the First Workshop on the globalization of domain specific languages*, pages 28–33. ACM, 2013.
- [12] Ivano Malavolta, Stefano Ruberto, Tommaso Soru, and Valerio Terragni. Hybrid mobile apps in the google play store: An exploratory investigation. In *Proceedings of the Second ACM International Conference on Mobile Software Engineering and Systems*, MOBILESoft ’15, pages 56–59, Piscataway, NJ, USA, 2015. IEEE Press.
- [13] W. Martin, F. Sarro, Y. Jia, Y. Zhang, and M. Harman. A survey of app store analysis for software engineering. *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, PP(99):1–1, 2016.
- [14] M. Martinez, L. Duchien, and M. Monperrus. Automatically extracting instances of code change patterns with ast analysis. In *2013 IEEE International Conference on Software Maintenance*, pages 388–391, Sept 2013.
- [15] Matias Martinez, Thomas Durieux, Romain Sommerard, Jifeng Xuan, and Martin Monperrus. Automatic repair of real bugs in java: A large-scale experiment on the defects4j dataset. *Empirical Software Engineering*, pages 1–29, 2016.
- [16] Matias Martinez and Martin Monperrus. Mining software repair models for reasoning on the search space of automated program fixing. *Empirical Softw. Engg.*, 20(1):176–205, February 2015.
- [17] Matias Martinez and Martin Monperrus. Astor: A program repair library for java (demo). In *Proceedings of the 25th International Symposium on Software Testing and Analysis*, ISSTA 2016, pages 441–444, New York, NY, USA, 2016. ACM.
- [18] Hoang Duong Thien Nguyen, Dawei Qi, Abhik Roychoudhury, and Satish Chandra. Semfix: Program repair via semantic analysis. In *Proceedings of the 2013 International Conference on Software Engineering*, ICSE ’13, pages 772–781, Piscataway, NJ, USA, 2013. IEEE Press.
- [19] Manuel Palmieri, Inderjeet Singh, and Antonio Cicchetti. Comparison of cross-platform mobile development tools. In *Intelligence in Next Generation Networks (ICIN), 2012 16th International Conference on*, pages 179–186. IEEE, 2012.
- [20] Kai Pan, Sunghun Kim, and E. James Whitehead, Jr. Toward an understanding of bug fix patterns. *Empirical Softw. Engg.*, 14(3):286–315, June 2009.
- [21] Renaud Pawlak, Martin Monperrus, Nicolas Petitprez, Carlos Noguera, and Lionel Seinturier. Spoon: A library for implementing analyses and transformations of java source code. *Software: Practice and Experience*, page na, 2015.
- [22] Joachim Perchat, Mikael Desertot, and Sylvain Lecomte. Component based framework to create mobile cross-platform applications. *Procedia Computer Science*, 19:1004–1011, 2013.
- [23] Joachim Perchat, Mikael Desertot, and Sylvain Lecomte. Common framework: A hybrid approach to integrate cross-platform components in mobile application. *Journal of Computer Science*, 10(11):2165, 2014.
- [24] J. Xuan, M. Martinez, F. DeMarco, M. Clément, S. L. Marcote, T. Durieux, D. Le Berre, and M. Monperrus. Nopol: Automatic repair of conditional statement bugs in java programs. *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, 43(1):34–55, Jan 2017.