Getting Results from Search–Based Approaches to Software Engineering

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1 Introduction

Software engineers often face problems associated with the balancing of competing constraints, trade-offs between concerns and requirement imprecision. Perfect solutions are often either impossible or impractical and the nature of the problems often makes the definition of analytical algorithms problematic.

Like other engineering disciplines, software engineering is typically concerned with near optimal solutions or those which fall within a specified acceptable tolerance. Software engineering problems often lead to observations such as those below:

"We need to balance **competing constraints**."
"We have to cope with **inconsistency**."
"Unfortunately there are **many potential solutions**."
"There is **no perfect answer**..."
"...but I **can distinguish good ones from bad**."

It is precisely these observations which make robust, meta-heuristic, search-based optimization techniques readily applicable. For the past twenty years, engineers from the fields of mechanical, chemical, electrical and civil engineering have been applying search–based techniques, such as genetic algorithms, to arrive at optimal and near optimal solutions to constrained problems within large search spaces.

More recently, search–based techniques has started to find application in *software engineering* problem domains. This area of *search–based* software engineering has its origins in work on search–based testing, which began in the mid 1990s. In the past four years the field has experienced a rapid increase in activity; there are now over fifty universities and industrial research/practitioner groups working on search–based software engineering, and the spectrum of new results and application areas continues to grow rapidly.

Already, search-based solutions have been applied to software engineering problems right through the development life-cycle. For example, existing work has shown the applicability of search-based approaches to, among others, the 'next release' problem (requirements engineering) [2], project cost estimation [1, 6, 8, 9, 16], testing [3, 5, 12, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25] automated re-modularisation (software maintenance) [10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21], transformation [11, 14, 26] and studies of software evolution [4]. An introductory overview of the field can be found in [15], while a more detailed survey can be found in [7].

The tutorial will provide each participant with the ability to exploit Search–Based Software Engineering (SBSE) theory and techniques and to be able to apply them to a chosen area of software engineering.

The objectives are that, having taken the tutorial, each participant will be able to:

1. Have a working understanding of two key search techniques: Genetic Algorithms and Hill Climbing.

2. Understand the three crucial ingredients; Representation, Fitness function and optimization technique.

3. Understand how to determine whether the application of these techniques is effective.

4. Have an appreciation of some of the advanced topics in SBSE: Convergence/Stopping criteria, Hybrid search approaches, Search space reduction and Fitness landscape transformation.

Search-Based software Engineering is a fast growing field. Growth in interest is fueled by the way in which search techniques can be applied right across the life-cycle and the speed with which the techniques can be mastered and deployed to produce results.

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