Chapter XXIV

Trusting Computers Through Trusting Humans:
Software Verification in a Safety–Critical Information System

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the question of how we may trust automatically generated program code. The code walkthroughs and inspections of software engineering mimic the ways that mathematicians go about assuring themselves that a mathematical proof is true. Mathematicians have difficulty accepting a computer generated proof because they cannot go through the social processes of trusting its construction. Similarly, those involved in accepting a proof of a computer system or computer generated code cannot go through their traditional processes of trust. The process of software verification is bound up in software quality assurance procedures, which are themselves subject to commercial pressures. Quality standards, including military standards, have procedures for human trust designed into them. An action research case study of an avionics system within a military aircraft company illustrates these points, where the software quality assurance (SQA) procedures were incommensurable with the use of automatically generated code.

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INTRODUCTION

They have computers, and they may have other weapons of mass destruction. Janet Reno, former US Attorney General

In this chapter our aim is to develop a theoretical framework with which to analyse a case study where one of the authors was involved, acting as an action researcher in the quality assurance procedures of a safety-critical system. This involved the production of software for aeroplane flight systems. An interesting tension arose between the automatically generated code of the software system (i.e., ‘auto-code’—produced automatically by a computer, using CASE [Computer Aided Software Engineering] tools from a high level design) and the requirement of the quality assurance process which had built into it the requirement for human understanding and trust of the code produced.

The developers of the system in the case study designed it around auto-code—computer generated software, free from ‘human’ error, although not proved correct in the mathematical sense, and cheaper and quicker to produce than traditional program code. They looked to means of verifying the correctness of their system through standard software quality assurance (SQA) procedures. However, ultimately, they were unable to bring themselves to reconcile their verification procedures with automatically generated code. Some of the reason for this was that trust in human verification was built into (or inscribed into [Akrich, 1992]) the standards and quality assurance procedures which they were obliged to follow in building the system. Despite their formally couched descriptions, the standards and verification procedures were completely reliant on human verification at every step. However these ‘human trust’ procedures were incompatible with the automated production of software in ways we show below. The end result was not failure in the traditional sense but a failure to resolve incom-
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