

# Software Engineering Projects Analysis using Interactive Multimodal Graph Explorer – IMiGEr

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**Abstract:** This paper describes a visualization technique designed to help work with complex diagrams containing multiple types of nodes and edges, by using a combination of visual clutter reduction and graph exploration techniques. We show its application, including preliminary evaluation, on software engineering projects data gathered from various tools and repositories used for software development. An online tool implementing the technique and plans for its extension by a connected view of time perspective data are briefly presented.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Software development projects become more complex and their content includes more types of dedicated roles, artifacts and activities. Thus, getting insights and understanding the relations among these elements is more and more difficult. Often the information is tracked in multiple unconnected or loosely connected systems. There are several challenges when it comes to full understanding of a project such as being able to easily find out:

- status of activities and artifacts,
- overall difference of artifacts since last check,
- health of the project from the process point of view (e.g., if there are any anti-patterns occurring),
- balance of effort spent by various team members,
- find out the artifacts related to a group of items (e.g., tickets a in sprint)
- each team member performing activities appropriate to role(s) assigned to him/her,

The above-mentioned topics are just a few of different phenomena one could need to find out about the project as there are many anti-patterns identified. Besides that there are many problems remaining uncovered.

We address the above-mentioned challenges by the new approach using software process anti-pattern detector and novel interactive visualization. This paper mainly focuses on the visualization part of the ap-

proach. Its novel visualization techniques will be used for understanding the software development process. We use the software engineering project data represented as large graphs consisting of large number of nodes and edges. These are in its nature of various types. It is difficult to explore the structure of such graphs, create a mental model of the whole graph and find its relevant parts.

The approach presented in this paper attempts to reconcile the contradictory requirements to show large graphs while being able to see enough details needed for understanding. Advanced visualization techniques used in our approach helps the process of understanding. It describes possible ways of addressing some of the challenges by providing the ability of fast understanding element relations and mental model creation. Understanding such relations could lead to lowering of time wasted on its analysis and improvements design. In this paper, we present generalized concepts of node-edge graph exploration on domain of software engineering project elements (and their relations). We are designing the solution to be able to work with data from other domains as well.

Currently, we implemented part of the overall concept of project exploration. Currently researched parts are described in Section 5. Such concept could then help understanding various aspects by interactive visualization of static relations visualization and interconnected Time-line.

## 1.1 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is structured into following sections. Section 2 provides overview of the related work. Section 2.1 describes the SPADe tool used for repositories mining and analysis. Section 3 describes our experimental notation, the IMiGER tool and relevant parts for visualization. Technical information related to implementation and availability are described in Section 4. Section 5 presents the work in progress and improvements planned. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper with the summary of findings.

## 2 RELATED WORK

For the related work, we are focusing on visualization domain as we mainly present such approach in this paper. Our focus is on various techniques to reduce the complexity of visualized information.

Visual clutter in large node-edge diagrams can be reduced by many techniques, such as bundling (Holten and Van Wijk, 2009), sampling (Rafiei, 2005), clustering (Chen and Liu, 2003), etc. From the well-developed taxonomy of these techniques described by Ellis and Dix (Ellis and Dix, 2007) the following ones are primarily relevant for our work. An example of such clutter is illustrated in Figure 1 that shows relations between software engineering artifacts in 5 months software development projects done by 4 members teams.

Firstly, visual clutter caused by the lines is often reduced by edge bundling (Holten, 2006). Although this approach reduces the clutter, it makes it difficult to trace the dependencies between connected nodes leading through the edge bundles. Secondly, the clustering of components (nodes) so that multiple components are visually represented by one node can also reduce visual clutter. Thus, the number of nodes in the whole diagram is reduced, though the connections among components are usually still present. Clusters can either be marked manually, in an automated way (Chiricota et al., 2003; Mancoridis et al., 1998) or by a combination of those approaches. Lastly, the chosen layout algorithm is an influencing factor since it can ease orientation in both clustered graphs (Feng, 1997) and the non-clustered ones (Hachul and Jnger, 2007).

Previously, we verified some of the concepts described in this paper on a user-study (Holy et al., 2015), but limiting the approach only to one type of node and one type of edge visualizing only the domain of the Java software call graphs. There are many

available tools for graph visualization such as Gephi<sup>1</sup> or NodeXL<sup>2</sup>. Currently visualized data are in its nature multimodal graphs (Ghani et al., 2012), (Srinivasan and Stasko, 2018) because the nodes and relations belong to different types. For nodes, we are showing for instance authors, commits, wiki pages etc. Edges then captures various types of relations among nodes, such as authorship, commit to ticket connections etc.

### 2.1 SPADe

To be able to address above-mentioned challenges we need a way of collecting the software engineering data from various tools. Software Process Anti-pattern Detector (SPADe) is an experimental tool collecting software project development data from repositories in various Application Lifecycle Management (ALM) tools. The overall architecture of SPADe is shown in Figure 2. SPADe stores data in a metamodel (Picha and Brada, 2016) capable of capturing project data irrespective of the source tool and process model used by any particular project. The main purpose of SPADe is to detect software process and project management bad practices, a.k.a. anti-patterns. Other uses include compliance check of the project and a given process model or analyses specifically aimed on a certain aspect of the project, for example, the role of an architect (Picha et al., 2017). The research topic attached to SPADe then focuses on investigating the relation (if there is any) between these phenomena and projects success and/or product quality.

Along with storing data in the database, SPADe produces several outputs to be used in other tools for specialized analysis. One of those is a JSON file with relevant project data to be visualized in IMiGER. These include people active in the project, artifacts (files, wiki pages, etc.), tickets from issue-tracking systems, repository commits and general changes performed on the tickets or artifacts. The SPADe JSON file also includes relations between these elements, for instance authorship, ticket assignments, explicit ticket relations, commit-ticket traceability links, artifacts attached to tickets and/or wiki pages, etc. When visualized in IMiGER, this data provides an insight into the structure of the projects and personnel activities.

<sup>1</sup><https://gephi.org/>

<sup>2</sup><https://archive.codeplex.com/>

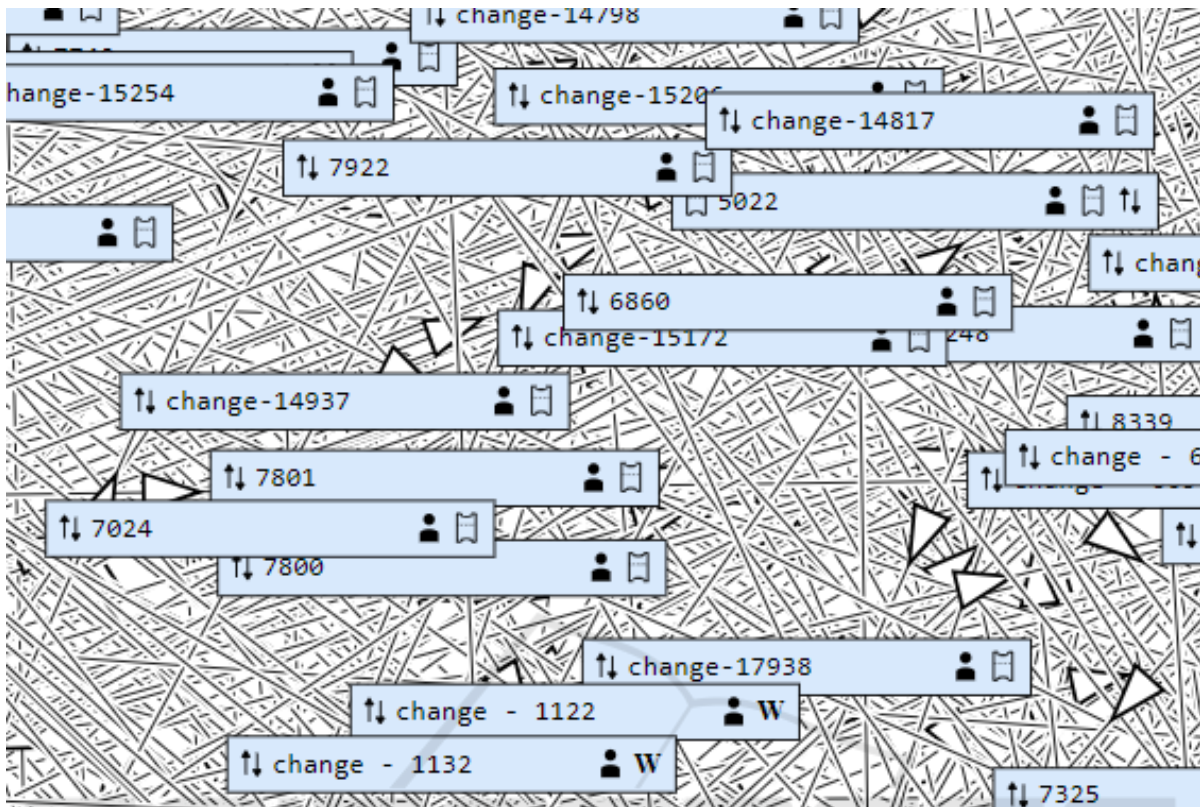


Figure 1: Visual clutter caused by large number of nodes and edges.

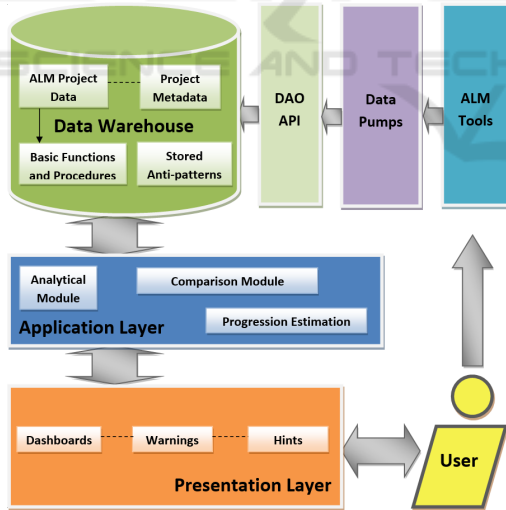


Figure 2: Overall SPADe architecture.

### 3 INTERACTIVE MULTIMODAL GRAPH EXPLORATION

The aim to described approach is to be able to find out desired information quickly. When we speak about software engineering project data, in most of the cases

we will be working with data containing at least hundreds or rather thousands of elements (nodes). While exploring such number of elements in a graphical way shown all on one canvas we will see lot of visual clutter. We are facing the contradictory requirements of not seeing useful information when showing the whole graph and not seeing the context of elements when showing enough details about particular nodes. Additionally, in software projects domain we have multiple types of both nodes and edges, which creates additional complexity to the information visualized. While for single type of node and edge user can easily understand the line between two nodes as connection, for multiple types of edges simply showing single line does not provide detailed information. Similarly, the nodes visualization should reflect its type in way that is effective.

As an outcome of above-mentioned challenges, we designed the visualization to use interactivity and details on demand principle to make the work with the graph effective. One of the key aspects is to use information hiding principle to reduce the number of nodes in the graph to enable the mental model creation.

The approach described in this paper is able to display various types of data, which is enabled by generalized input graph structure. It is able to handle

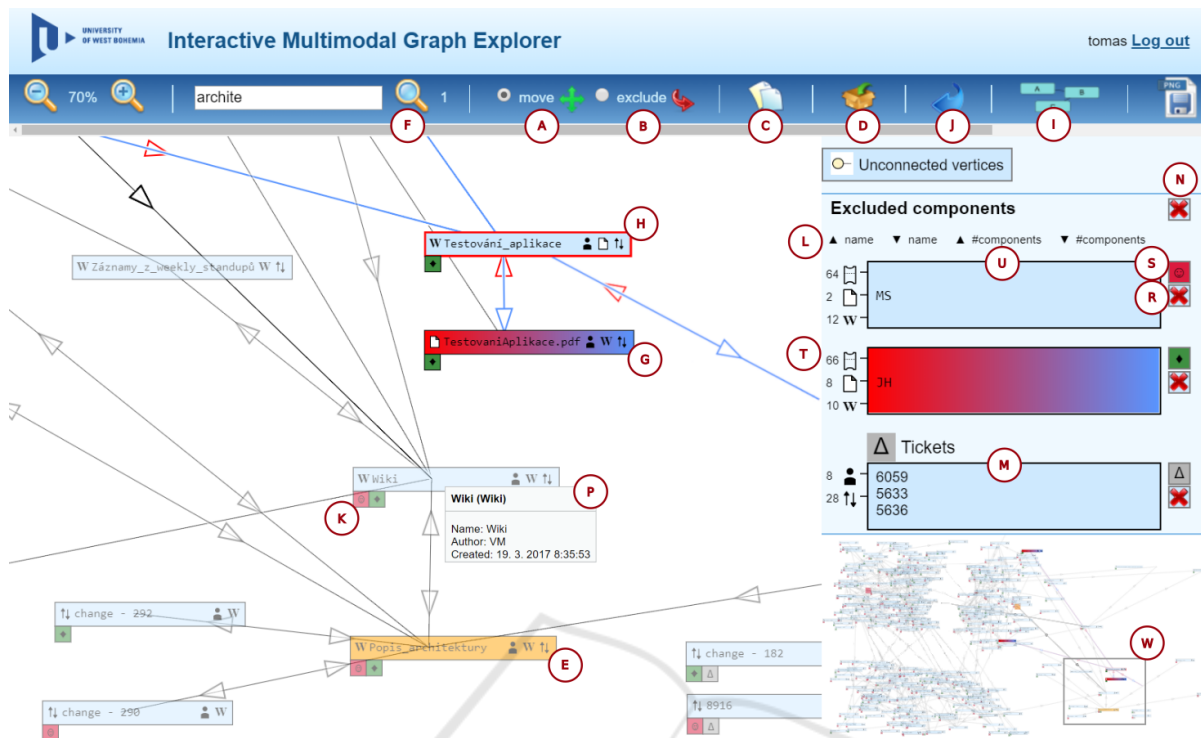


Figure 3: Complex node Application Explorer tool demonstration.

multiple types of both nodes and edges. Thus, it can suite to any graph data which could be converted to given generalized structure (e.g., software engineering projects, intelligence agencies analysis, historical data, computer networks, social networks).

To be able to verify techniques presented in this paper we have created their implementation. It is called Interactive Multimodal Graph Exploration abbreviated as IMiGER. It is able to show the software engineering data represented as a graph in the web page. The demonstration of the IMiGER's GUI is shown in Figure 3. It shows the tool interface on a node diagram of a software engineering project. Figure 3 shows one instance of generalized graph structure (multiple types of nodes and edges) on dependency graph showing relations among software engineering project artifacts, people involved and tickets created during software development project. These data were collected by the SPADe (Picha and Brada, 2016) project data mining tool<sup>3</sup> from various data sources, for instance Git, JIRA, Bugzilla. These data were collected from 5 months software development projects done by 4 members teams.

<sup>3</sup><https://github.com/ReliSA/SPADe>

### 3.1 Visualization Overview

The visualization consists of interactive graph area, side area and toolbar. In the interactive graph area, nodes are shown including their type, for instance "wiki page". Details like artifact authorship are hidden to reduce the visual clutter and provided on demand by selecting individual edge (cf. the grey pop-up). In such case the connected nodes and the edge itself are highlighted, rest of the nodes are suppressed using transparency.

The side area is showing nodes excluded from the graph. For such nodes, there are no edges shown to reduce a visual clutter in the graph area in first place, but they could be shown on demand. Another option is to use so called proxy symbols instead. These symbols indicate connection between node in side area and node in graph area, as shown near each node.

For further visual clutter reduction and graph simplification, the concept of groups is used. These are created in the side area for representing multiple nodes as one while providing aggregate information on connections. Each group can also be shown back in the graph area as one node. The toolbar allows to perform search, trigger force-directed layout, and other standard operations (such as panning and zooming). For easier navigation in the diagram the minimap is shown in the right panel.

### 3.2 Interactivity Features

The approach we have proposed reduces the visual clutter by multiple visualization techniques. In this section we will focus on their explanation.

As we use removing of the nodes from the main graph area to the SeNoA area as visual clutter reduction technique, we need two modes of manipulating the nodes. Its switching is done with appropriate icons in the toolbar. First mode is for moving nodes (A) where the user can manually adjust the layout of the diagram. Second mode (B) serves for removing nodes from the diagram area to the SeNoA area simply by clicking on the desired nodes, which should be removed.

Last two icons in the toolbar serve for the automatic removal of a configured number of nodes from the diagram to the SeNoA area. The tool is currently configured to remove most connected node, but more sophisticated algorithms are subject of a future work. The icon (C) is used for removing such node and adding it to the SeNoA area as individual item. The next icon (D) creates one group for all of them. These techniques helps user to quickly reduce the initial visual clutter of the graph by removing the most connected nodes. As in most of the graphs are very likely present nodes having much higher number of edges compared to other ones.

From our observations, we know that after removing most connected nodes, users usually focus on the items they are interested in. For such cases a simple search could be used. In Figure 3, one can see the search result for a string “archite”. Two nodes in the diagram contain this word as indicated by the number (F). Nodes matching the search are highlighted by an orange color (E).

### 3.3 The Separated Nodes Area

SeNoA (sidebar) is used for removing nodes with a large number of connections from the main diagram into a so called *separated nodes area* (abbreviated as SeNoA) placed on the border of a window (the right sidebar in Figure 3). When a user moves components from the main diagram to this area, the lines between these components and remaining components are elided. This essentially marks a component as a “familiar one”. Once component removed, the user may continue getting familiar with the rest of the system. Often, a particular node (such as person) is connected to large number of other ones. Such nodes are good candidates to be place to SeNoA (U). Then, graph’s visual clutter is usually considerably decreased. One of the cases may be a node showing

person. Such a node is probably connected to most of nodes in the system and its displacement reduces the graph complexity.

We measured several projects lasting 5 months, which were done by 4 people team. The results of clutter reduction are shown in Table 1. Columns Nodes and Edges represent the number of nodes and edges created in the graph by the SPADe data collection and analysis. In the column Nodes Moved we capture the number of nodes removed from the graph area to the SeNoA. Finally, the column Edges Hidden shows the percentage of the edges reduced from the graph area by moving the described number of nodes to SeNoA. It shows that by using the proposed technique, a significant visual clutter reduction may be achieved.

Table 1: Several Systems with the Number of Components and Connections.

Project	Nodes	Edges	Nodes Moved	Edges Hidden
Prj 1	304	1775	5	36%
Prj 2	1236	9393	4	27%
Prj 3	1347	11095	6	19%

SeNoA consists of a list of items. Each item consists of interfaces (indicated with the mark (T) in Figure 3), nodes (U) and one corresponding symbol (S). Interfaces are clustered into sets (T) according to the opposite node type. Numbers beside the clustered connections denote the number of elements clustered in the respective symbol.

It is also possible to remove all nodes from SeNoA area back to the diagram area by using the red cross icon (N). Which will allow user to analyze clusters in the graph area step-by-step rather then get confused by the clutter. There is also a possibility to sort the nodes shown in SeNoA (L). Currently, there is a possibility to sort nodes by their names or number of nodes contained in a group. Both mentioned sorting possibilities could be ascending or descending. This allows the user to find the nodes faster in the SeNoA as the list could easily become long.

The purpose of symbols (S) is to create a clear and easily recognizable key, which uniquely identifies items within SeNoA. These symbols can be used in the diagram area to represent connections between a given node and the corresponding item placed in SeNoA. They are shown as small rectangles neighboring to the displayed nodes (K) and containing the symbol, which corresponds to the connected item (S). One can also see a group consisting of three nodes (M). These symbols have graphics, which may humans easily remember, to help build a mental model.

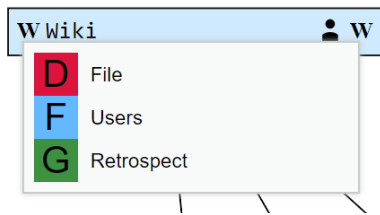


Figure 4: Adding nodes from diagram to SeNoA groups.

The symbols allow user to be able to understand that there is a connection between particular nodes, but not clutter the graph by using a line.

If one clicks to the connection icons (T) of a node in SeNoA, its connections and connected nodes become highlighted by blue or red color. For the outgoing connections, a blue color is used for highlighting, red one for the opposite ones. It can be seen between outgoing of the *JH* node in SeNoA (T) and node (H) in the diagram area. Each individual node shown in SeNoA has its own button (R) to remove it back to its original position in the diagram area. That is useful when user already understands the diagram in the main graph area and wants to for instance identify another cluster.

There could be additional information associated with a node. We apply details on demand principle and hide such information by default. For showing details, the tool offers grey tool-tip (P) when exploring elements.

Identifying groups of nodes represent one of the ways of graph simplification. Thus, their easy identification is important for process of getting familiar with the diagram. There is a possibility to add desired nodes from diagram area to existing items in SeNoA by a context menu, as shown in Figure 4. The context menu will appear after a right mouse click on any nodes in the diagram area. It contains symbols and colors of all items included in SeNoA. After adding a node to an item, the group is created. Users are usually creating multiple groups mainly for two reasons. First because the nodes belong to the same semantic entity such as Sprint, Release or Team. Second, they want to just eliminate the visual clutter of nodes added, as they are not relevant for them. A group could be shown both in SeNoA and in graph area. So while having multiple nodes in one group user can still see its relations with other nodes directly in the graph area.

## 4 CURRENT STATUS OF THE TECHNIQUE IMPLEMENTATION

We have implemented described techniques in the web application to enable anyone to analyze data from any domain. The tool is running on a public URL<sup>4</sup> and available for general use. The source code is available from a GitHub repository<sup>5</sup>.

IMiGer uses servlets from the enterprise Java technology as the back-end technology. Servlets are used mainly because of the Java implementation of the SPaDe tool. The front-end is based on HTML5 and JavaScript. Canvas and SVG elements from HTML5 are used to represent the nodes of the diagram. We also tested several graphical frameworks, but we concluded that their customization would be difficult because most of our present and future features require custom implementation. That is the reason why we implemented the GUI from scratch.

## 5 WORK IN PROGRESS

The graphs showing static relations among nodes shown are in most of the cases growing quite rapidly along with size and duration of a project. We are currently working on various concepts of manual and automated filtering of relevant data. We try to apply principles of showing details on demand and provide different perspectives to the same data such as time perspective. We believe such principles will help to reduce the number of elements in the graph area to the relevant ones only and thus dramatically reduce visual clutter and speed-up understanding of the data shown.

Main part of current work is dedicated to additional connected view representing the Time-line of all collected project events. So that the user can easily analyze the data from the time perspective and filter, the static relations in the graph area below only to relevant time window selected. Our previous experience shows that the Time-line based visualization, combined with the relations among displayed events helps users in orientation in complex data (Lipka, 2016).

Our implementation of the Time-line allows displaying events with required duration or only points in time. The granularity of the time may range from minutes to years, so it can serve both for a high level overview or for the detailed analysis of the events in some particular part of the project. The visualization

<sup>4</sup><http://relisa-dev.kiv.zcu.cz:8085/imiger/>

<sup>5</sup><https://github.com/ReliSA/IMiGer>

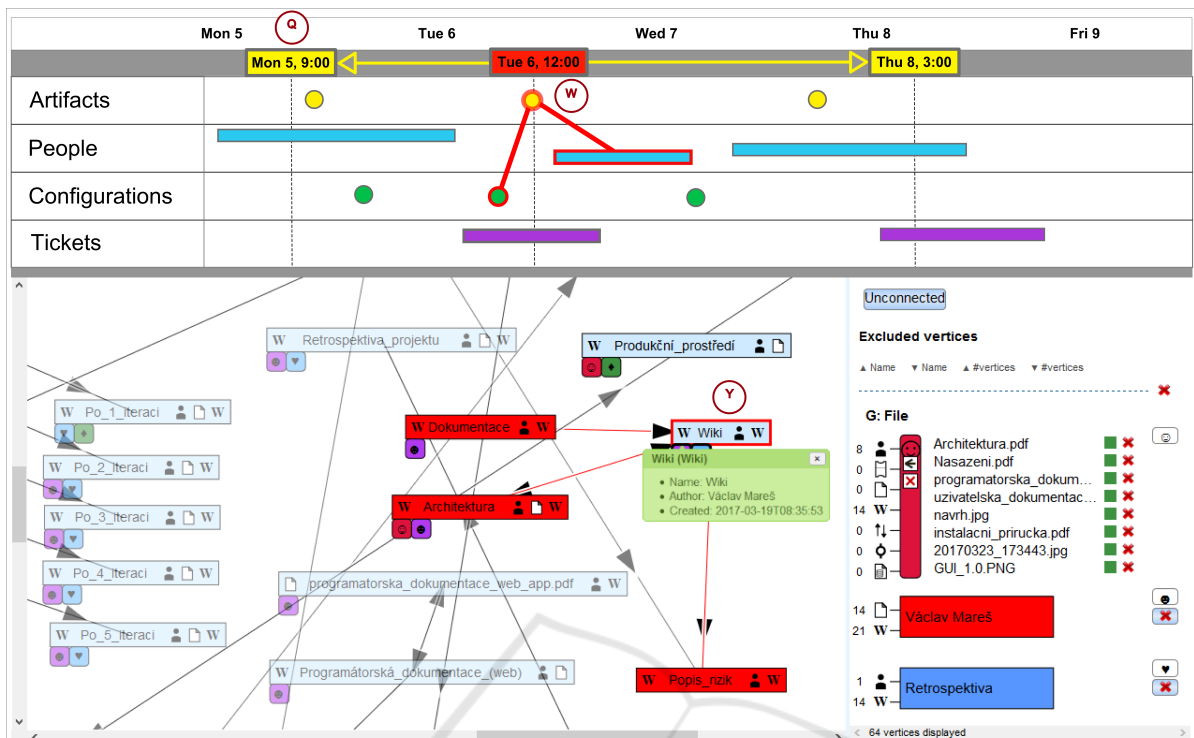


Figure 5: Connected views between static relations and Time-line visualization proposal.

also supports various event renderers, allowing recognizing different types of events. When required, relations between events can be displayed within the Time-line, for example to indicate the authorship of the artifacts or inclusion into a configuration. The Time-line also allows dividing the space into so called "swim-lanes", in order to separate nodes types.

In the proposed visualization, Time-line is placed above the relations graph. It contains four swim-lanes as SPADe meta-model is classifying the software projects elements into four categories. These are Artifacts, People, Configurations and Tickets. Each such element can be positioned in time when appropriate rules are used. For example the developer can be displayed in the People swim-lane, for the duration of his or her involvement in the project, the configuration can be displayed as a point in time when it was specified.

Both Time-line and static relations graph show the requested details on demand. For instance, if user clicks on the node Wiki in the graph area (Y) (in Figure 5) its static relations in the graph area as well as the corresponding records (W) (in Figure 5) in the Time-line area will be highlighted. The same principle applies in opposite direction, once selecting any record on Time-line items are highlighted in the graph area. Additionally, as was mentioned before, the Time-line is able to show the relations of selected

record directly in the Time-line itself.

To be able to better understand static relations in larger project one could benefit from viewing some limited time frame of the underlying data. Viewing whole project could easily contain thousands of nodes and edges in the graph. For instance, project manager is very often interested in current sprint or iteration. For such cases, the Time-line should be able to easily use start and end date filter for nodes and edges in the static relations graph. Such principle is illustrated in 5 by yellow time positions (marked by (Q)).

We will also continue work on automated clustering techniques, which will group suitable sets of nodes into the groups. For instance, all nodes connected only to particular node could be represented as one group (e.g., wiki pages created by one author).

Another planned visual clutter reduction technique will show them people directly in the SeNoA after the diagram is loaded and thus reduce the number of edges in the diagram area. As people are usually representing the most connected nodes (in software engineering projects).

We have chosen force-directed algorithms to be used in the application after a short survey. These features should let the user get the insight faster by showing most connected nodes in the center of the diagram. We also plan to evaluate above-mentioned ideas by a case or user study. Layout reflecting the

node types into position calculations will be also investigated. We are now considering circular tree layouts separating sorting the nodes on the circle based on the nodes type.

In addition, providing software process anti-pattern visualization is currently being researched. Anti-pattern can be detected by SPADe and the visualization can be then used to provide the exploration of the related data. The visualization challenge in this topic is finding the proper way of visual representation of found patterns, as they are not only referring to the static structure or time perspective.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we addressed the problem of better understanding of complex structures, events and relations in software engineering projects. There are usually thousands of elements in the such projects thus their visualization easily becomes hardly comprehensible.

We propose several closely tied visualization techniques which help dealing with complexity. These are based on the details on demand principle, information hiding and interactivity, and are manifested as a sidebar used for node and edge reductions, cluster identification and hiding, edge elimination and interactive highlighting.

We have implemented a toolchain which is able to collect, transform and visualize data from software engineering project repositories. The user is dealing mainly with the interactive visualization part. It is useful in the project analysis process when the user is interactively getting familiar with a relations among artifacts and people. It helps with creating the mental model by easing the process of clusters creation.

While the data mining process is delegated to the SPADe tool in the toolchain, IMiGEr presented here concerns with a user interaction when analyzing a project and getting familiar with its structure. Preliminary evaluation shows that the presented ideas are helpful in a large graph visualization, where one suffers from visual clutter caused by the large number of connection lines. The future work is to bring additional point of view in the form of time perspective and its interaction with existing approach. It should bring the possibility of advanced filtering and including its automated ways.

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