

A Bidirectional Model-Driven Spreadsheet Environment

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Abstract—In this extended abstract we present a bidirectional model-driven framework to develop spreadsheets. By being model driven, our approach allows to evolve a spreadsheet model and automatically have the data co-evolved. The bidirectional component achieves precisely the inverse, that is, to evolve the data and automatically obtain a new model to which the data conforms.

Keywords—Model-driven Engineering; Bidirectional Transformations; Software Evolution; Model Evolution; Spreadsheets

I. INTRODUCTION

Spreadsheets are widely used in the development of business applications. Spreadsheet systems offer end users a high level of flexibility but this freedom comes at a price: spreadsheets are notoriously error prone as shown by numerous studies reporting that up to 90% of real-world spreadsheets contain errors [1].

In recent years, the spreadsheet research community has recognized the need to support *model-driven spreadsheet development* (MDSD), and to provide spreadsheet developers and end users with methodologies, techniques and tool support to improve their productivity. In fact, several techniques have been proposed, namely the use of templates [2] and *ClassSheet* models [3].

These proposals allow users to define a spreadsheet business model from which a customized spreadsheet application holding the actual data is generated, while the consistency of the spreadsheet data with the overlying model is guaranteed.

A significant drawback of such approaches lies in the fact that the evolution of both spreadsheet models and the instances generated from them is considered in isolation. Thus, a simple evolution step on the model side could break the conformity with its instance, and vice versa.

In an attempt to overcome this drawback, we have proposed in the past a single and coherent environment for MDSD. For this, we have started by embedding *ClassSheets* in a traditional spreadsheet system [4]. Later, we have proposed to automatically co-evolve spreadsheet instances upon a model transformation [5], a feature that has also been integrated in a tool [6]. Finally, we have defined the theoretical setting to reason about spreadsheet models and instances in the reverse direction: we allow for data instance evolutions while models are automatically co-evolved [7].

The purpose of this extended abstract, together with the poster that accompanies it, is to introduce the global bidirectional model-driven spreadsheet environment that we finally achieve.

II. THE MDSHEET EVOLUTION ENVIRONMENT

In [6] we have presented a spreadsheet system that provides a MDSD environment. Figure 1 shows such a spreadsheet environment for managing a yearly travel budget.

This environment has the following features:

- *ClassSheet* models are embedded in spreadsheet systems [4], providing a coherent environment for MDSD. The environment consists of two worksheets: one contains the *ClassSheet* model (model worksheet), and the other contains the spreadsheet instance (data worksheet), as shown in Figure 1.
- Initial and customized spreadsheet instances are generated from *ClassSheet* models. Such instances include tailor-made versions of update operations.
- The customized spreadsheet instance guides end users in introducing data that conforms to the embedded model: for example, rows with type integer only accept integer values. Another key feature of this approach is that blocks of cells are automatically produced, for example, to add a new year budget, that consists of three columns/attributes, the user must press on the button in column H. Formulas are also automatically updated, in our example the summation formulas in column I.
- Spreadsheet users can evolve the *ClassSheet* model, by using predefined evolution step operations. The MDSheet environment provides buttons (c+, c-, Col+, etc.) that perform typical model evolution steps, like adding a column/row in a *ClassSheet* class (for example, adding a column/attribute taxes to the class year). After each evolution step, the environment automatically co-evolves the spreadsheet data.

This spreadsheet environment¹, however, provides only model evolution and spreadsheet data co-evolution. In the next section we describe the extension of the core evaluation engine of the MDSheet framework to provide a bidirectional

¹A demonstration video of this environment is available at <http://ssaapp.di.uminho.pt>.

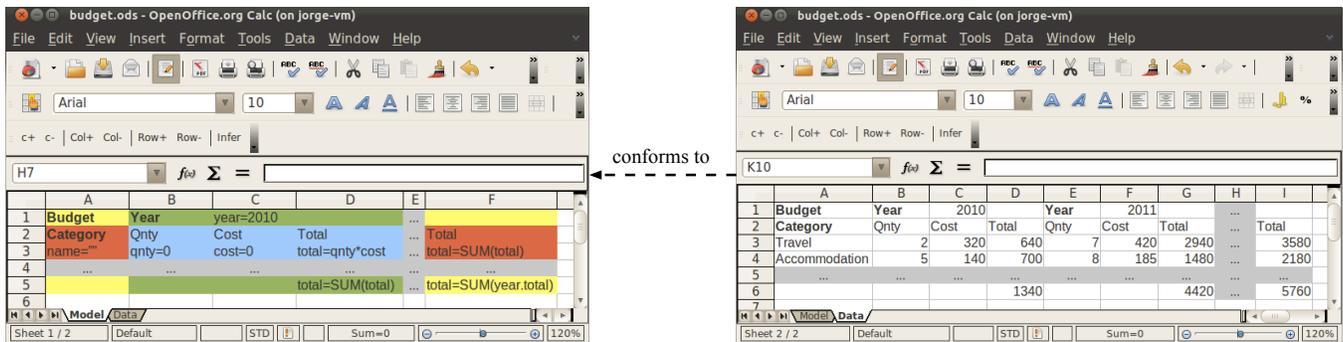


Figure 1. Model-driven spreadsheet environment for a yearly travel budget.

transformation mechanism so that spreadsheet users can evolve both the *ClassSheet* model and the spreadsheet data.

III. A BIDIRECTIONAL EXTENSION FOR MDSHEET

A bidirectional MDSheet environment extends the features described in the previous section with the possibility of end users evolving both the *ClassSheet* model and the spreadsheet data. The *ClassSheet* or spreadsheet data evolution steps are modeled as model or data transformations.

The *ClassSheet* model transformations are related to a sequence of transformations on the data. This relation ensures that a valid model transformation is equivalent to a valid data transformation and that the evolved data conforms to the evolved model. A similar approach has been done for data transformations by relating them to model transformations as depicted in Figure 2. These relations guarantee safety by construction.

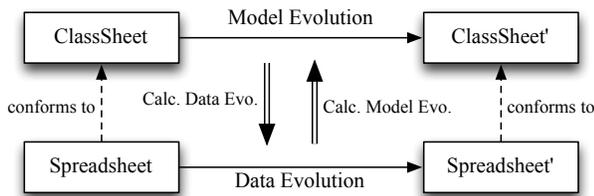


Figure 2. Bidirectional transformational system diagram.

The theoretical foundations of our bidirectional evolution techniques are described in [7], where we also present the API defining all evolution steps available for the *ClassSheet* model and the spreadsheet data.

We have extended our MDSheet addon in order to provide bidirectional evolution mechanisms to the OpenOffice spreadsheet system. This addon consists of a set of OpenOffice Basic macros and visual buttons that provide common evolution step operations on spreadsheet data (and models). In fact, the environment shown in Figure 1 supports bidirectionality: evolution step buttons are available in both the data and model worksheets. For example, the Col+ button in the data worksheet evolves the data by adding a new column in all instances of the selected class. A detailed

description of the architecture of the bidirectional MDSheet environment is presented in the accompanying poster.

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