Fixing Continuous Integration Tests From Within the IDE With Contextual Information

Casper Boone  
Delft University of Technology  
The Netherlands  
mmail@casperboone.nl

Carolin Brandt  
Delft University of Technology  
The Netherlands  
c.e.brandt@tudelft.nl

Andy Zaidman  
Delft University of Technology  
The Netherlands  
a.e.zaidman@tudelft.nl

ABSTRACT

The most common reason for Continuous Integration (CI) builds to break is failing tests. When a build breaks, a developer often has to scroll through hundreds to thousands of log lines to find which test is failing and why. Finding the issue is a tedious process that relies on a developer’s experience and increases the cost of software testing. We investigate how presenting different kinds of contextual information about CI builds in the Integrated Development Environment (IDE) impacts the time developers take to fix a broken build. Our IntelliJ plugin TestAxis surfaces additional information such as a unique view of the code under test that was changed leading up to the build failure. We conduct a user experiment and show that TestAxis helps developers fix failing tests 13.4% to 48.6% faster. The participants found the features of TestAxis useful and would incorporate it in their development workflow to save time. With TestAxis we set an important step towards removing the need to manually inspect build logs and bringing CI build results to the IDE, ultimately saving developers time.

KEYWORDS

Software Testing, Continuous Integration, Developer Assistance, IDE Plugin, User Experiment

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION

Continuous Integration (CI) is a wide-spread practice in both industry and open-source projects [20, 32, 43]. Its goal is to detect issues as soon as possible by providing feedback before a change makes it to production. This avoids defects but also increases developer productivity [24], accelerates release frequency [18, 20], and improves communication of changes [16].

A typical CI build comprises building the application to ensure the code compiles, executing the tests to check whether the application still works as expected, and running static analysis tools [4, 35, 36] to safeguard the quality of the codebase [17]. If any of these steps fail, the whole CI build is considered to be “broken”. Failing tests are the most common reason for build failures [8, 26, 38].

When a build breaks, the developer has to find and investigate the cause of the build failure. The typical steps for a developer encountering a build failure are: inspecting the build log, developing a hypothesis about why the build is failing [41], confirming this hypothesis in their local development environment, and finally implementing a fix [37]. CI build logs typically consist of hundreds to thousands of lines and contain a lot of irrelevant information [13], which leads to developers feeling overwhelmed by the amount of detail [2], and through the verbosity it becomes hard to pinpoint bugs and their causes [40]. This makes finding the root cause of the failure a tedious and challenging process that relies on a developer’s experience and intuition [19, 37] which increases the cost of software testing [33].

CI platforms offer limited inspection and debugging functionality compared to a local development environment [20]. After developing an intuition with the build log on the CI platform, the developers have to switch to the context of their integrated development environment (IDE) for further investigation. Debugging assistance that obviates the need for manual build log inspection would support developers in the build-fixing process [19].

We conjecture that developers could fix broken builds faster if we provide richer, contextual information about their CI builds directly in their IDE. One advantage is that this can combine the information available to the CI server with the local information and presentation in the Integrated Development Environment (IDE) to give powerful insights about the test failures to developers. In this paper, we investigate three different types of contextual information and measure how they influence the developer’s failure-fixing behavior. In particular we look at three kinds of contextual information:

1. **Test Outcomes and Metadata** We investigate showing in the IDE which CI tests failed.
2. **Test Code** We study showing the code of the test that failed.
3. **Changed Code Under Test** Lastly, we explore showing the production code targeted by the test that changed since the last successful test run.

These three types of contextual information lead to these analogous research questions:

What is the influence of presenting the **test outcomes and metadata** on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?
RQ2 What is the influence of presenting the test code on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?

RQ3 What is the influence of presenting the code under test, where the changed code is highlighted, on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?

Apart from the impact on failure fixing time, we study how useful developers rate the different kinds of contextual information with the following research question:

RQ4 To what extent do developers consider contextual CI information in the IDE useful?

We develop TestAxis, a plugin for the IntelliJ IDE that presents CI build and test results. During CI builds, TestAxis captures information about test executions and coverage. The plugin notifies the developer about the build outcome, shows all failing tests with the name of the test, the failure message, and the corresponding stack trace, obviating the need to look at the build log (RQ1). We show the test code to help the developer understand the intent of the failing test (RQ2). TestAxis also features an overview of the relevant code under test (RQ3) by combining information about which code was executed by a test and which code was changed leading up to the build failure. We create a proof-of-concept implementation of TestAxis that we use to evaluate its effectiveness and perceived usefulness. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

In order to provide an answer to our research questions, we perform a within-subjects experiment. After opening questions, we ask participants to fix eight failing tests with and without the help of TestAxis. The plugin notifies the developer about the build outcome, shows all failing tests with the name of the test, the failure message, and the corresponding stack trace, obviating the need to look at the build log (RQ1). We show the test code to help the developer understand the intent of the failing test (RQ2). TestAxis also features an overview of the relevant code under test (RQ3) by combining information about which code was executed by a test and which code was changed leading up to the build failure. We create a proof-of-concept implementation of TestAxis that we use to evaluate its effectiveness and perceived usefulness. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

In order to provide an answer to our research questions, we perform a within-subjects experiment. After opening questions, we ask participants to fix eight failing tests with and without the help of TestAxis. The plugin notifies the developer about the build outcome, shows all failing tests with the name of the test, the failure message, and the corresponding stack trace, obviating the need to look at the build log (RQ1). We show the test code to help the developer understand the intent of the failing test (RQ2). TestAxis also features an overview of the relevant code under test (RQ3) by combining information about which code was executed by a test and which code was changed leading up to the build failure. We create a proof-of-concept implementation of TestAxis that we use to evaluate its effectiveness and perceived usefulness. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

In order to provide an answer to our research questions, we perform a within-subjects experiment. After opening questions, we ask participants to fix eight failing tests with and without the help of TestAxis. The plugin notifies the developer about the build outcome, shows all failing tests with the name of the test, the failure message, and the corresponding stack trace, obviating the need to look at the build log (RQ1). We show the test code to help the developer understand the intent of the failing test (RQ2). TestAxis also features an overview of the relevant code under test (RQ3) by combining information about which code was executed by a test and which code was changed leading up to the build failure. We create a proof-of-concept implementation of TestAxis that we use to evaluate its effectiveness and perceived usefulness. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

In order to provide an answer to our research questions, we perform a within-subjects experiment. After opening questions, we ask participants to fix eight failing tests with and without the help of TestAxis. The plugin notifies the developer about the build outcome, shows all failing tests with the name of the test, the failure message, and the corresponding stack trace, obviating the need to look at the build log (RQ1). We show the test code to help the developer understand the intent of the failing test (RQ2). TestAxis also features an overview of the relevant code under test (RQ3) by combining information about which code was executed by a test and which code was changed leading up to the build failure. We create a proof-of-concept implementation of TestAxis that we use to evaluate its effectiveness and perceived usefulness. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

2 TESTAXIS

In this section, we lay out the design of TestAxis and illustrate how it presents contextual information about the CI build and its tests directly in the developer’s IDE.

1Available at https://github.com/testaxis/testaxis-intellij-plugin

2.1 Build Notifications

When a CI build finishes, TestAxis pings the developer with a notification inside their IDE, eliminating the need for a context switch to the CI platform and back. From the notification messages, the developer is immediately guided to the other features of TestAxis that may help solve the build failure. Figure 1 shows an example of a build notification in TestAxis.

2.2 Presentation of Test Results

A core feature of TestAxis is presenting the CI test results in a more accessible format than raw build logs, obviating the need to inspect the build log manually. Figure 2 shows an example of how TestAxis displays the test case executions grouped by their class, similar to the IDE’s built-in test runner. This provides a familiar experience and structure to the results, making it easier to identify where in the system the failure occurs. For builds that fail due to something other than tests, TestAxis indicates that the build has failed due to a reason outside the scope of the tool.

2.3 Test Outcomes, Metadata and Test Code

When a developer inspects a failing test, TestAxis shows the test name, whether the test passed, the run time, and the execution date. As presented in Figure 3, TestAxis also shows the failure message and the stack trace. The stack trace includes links to the mentioned files or classes, which allows for quick navigation to the code which is not available from a CI build log.

TestAxis presents the source code of the test, obviating the need for manual search and navigation. Reading the test code may help developers understand the intent of the test or spot obvious mistakes quickly. Figure 4 shows an example of what this looks like.

Figure 1: An example of a build notification in TestAxis.

Figure 2: An example of the presentation of CI build test results in the IDE implementation of TestAxis.

1Available at https://github.com/testaxis/testaxis-intellij-plugin
2.4 Changed Code Under Test

The goal of the changed code under test feature is to highlight the parts of the production code that are likely to contain the issue causing the test to fail. For each test, TestAxis separately collects code coverage information during the CI build, a rather cheap operation since most CI builds run the whole test suite already.

As most tests interact with multiple parts of a codebase [34], the amount of covered code could still be too large for a developer to investigate. Assuming that the test fails due to an intrinsic issue in the code [27, 28], it is likely that the issue is located in a part of the production code that was changed in the commits leading up to the build failure. Since CI builds are commonly triggered after pushing new commits, TestAxis makes use of the full change information that is available through the version control system. Figure 5 shows how TestAxis intersects code coverage and change information to identify locations of interest to the developer. See Figure 6 to see how these locations are presented within TestAxis.

2.5 Implementation

We created a prototype of TestAxis which we use as part of our experiment. TestAxis consists of two main parts: the backend and the IDE plugin, see Figure 7. TestAxis receives, processes and stores the CI build results in the backend application and provides the results to the IDE plugin that presents the results to the user. A demonstration of the plugin is available at https://youtu.be/4sfnKsvqwKw.

A developer can set up TestAxis by installing the IntelliJ IDE plugin and signing in through GitHub or a TestAxis account. They configure the provided build result upload script to be run as the last step of their CI build. The upload script collects the test results and coverage results of individual tests and uploads them to the backend. By providing such a script, TestAxis does not depend on particular CI build providers. The IDE plugin presents the user with an access token that they can include in the new build step.

Both the backend and the IDE plugin are available open-source on GitHub.7

3 STUDY DESIGN

TestAxis attempts to improve the time needed to fix broken builds by presenting contextual information about the CI build in the developer’s IDE. We conduct a within-subjects experiment in which developers try out TestAxis. Our goal is to measure how the time needed to fix a failing test in a CI build is influenced by presenting different kinds of contextual information in the IDE: the test result RQ1, the test code RQ2, and the changed code under test RQ3. Furthermore, we elicit whether developers consider TestAxis useful RQ4.

3.1 Experiment Overview

Before the participants start the assignments, we ask them about their demographics and show two instruction videos. One presents the architecture and structure of the codebase of our example project JPacman and the other one explains the functionality of

7Available at https://github.com/testaxis
During the experiment, the participants solve four assignments with TestAxis. We design assignments in four different categories that target the kinds of contextual information we investigate in our study. Per category, we divide the participants into two groups so that each participant conducts one assignment per category without and one assignment with TestAxis. For each assignment, we present a CI build that failed due to failing tests. The participants have to find out which tests fail and why. Then, they have to come up with a fix. The researcher measures the time in seconds until the participant successfully fixes the failing test. After each assignment, they fill out a post-assignment questionnaire where we asked about what they felt they spent the most time on. After the experiment, the participants filled out a questionnaire asking about the usefulness of TestAxis and its features.

3.2 Example Project

The assignments of the experiment ask participants to fix failing test cases that attempt to mimic test failures that occur while working on real software projects. The simulation of realistic test failures requires that the designed test cases are part of a software project that is sufficiently complex and close to real-life projects. We picked JPacman, a simple Pacman-style game implemented in Java that is written for software testing education. The codebase of JPacman is small enough to be easy to understand within a short time. However, it does not have a trivial implementation to ensure that developers do not deviate from their usual behavior. The project has a variety of unit tests, integration tests, and system/end-to-end tests that are of a quality level comparable to an industry project. The project is available open-source on GitHub.

3.3 Assignment Design

We designed eight assignments in four categories. The categories evaluate different aspects of the feature set of TestAxis. To keep the maximum length of each experiment session reasonable, the first three categories have a time limit of five minutes, while the last has a time limit of ten minutes. The participants execute all eight assignments, for each category one with and one without TestAxis. In the overall experiment, each assignment is executed eight times with and eight times without TestAxis.

Category 1: Test Outcomes and Metadata. For the assignments in this category, the reason for the failure can be spotted from the test failure metadata (the name of the test and the stack trace). Figure 3 shows how TestAxis presents this information. Figure 8 illustrates how one assignment from this category is presented in both GitHub and TestAxis.

Category 2: Test Code. For the assignments in this category, the reason for the failure can be spotted in the test code (Figure 4).

Category 3: Code Under Test – Simple. For the assignments in this category, the reason for the failure can be spotted in the code under test (Figure 6). In Figure 9 we present how an assignment from this category is presented in both GitHub and TestAxis.

Category 4: Code Under Test – Advanced. For the assignments in this category, the reason for the failure can also be spotted in the code under test. However, these assignments are more advanced.

To mitigate learning or order effects, we randomize the order in which the participants solve the assignments. For each of the eight assignments, we compare the performance of both groups (with and without TestAxis). To prevent any effects of the randomized group selection, we use a crossover design: For each category, we only determine an overall trend if both assignments show the same trend when comparing the times with and without TestAxis. The complete assignments are available in our replication package.

3.4 Participants

To conduct the experiment and gain useful insights about the results, we needed to recruit a large enough number of participants. We required participants to have experience with Java and CI. This ensures a somewhat equal baseline and the ability for participants to reflect on their CI build-fixing workflows. At the same time, we wanted a diverse group of participants and therefore used a phased participant recruitment process with different target audiences per step. We first reached out to acquaintances, which are mostly (PhD) students. Then, we placed a message on the internal messaging platform of Computer Science teaching assistants of our institution, with a similar target audience. To target industry developers, we posted a collection of tweets on Twitter illustrating the capabilities of TestAxis and asking for a developer’s help to improve the project. Finally, we also posted on LinkedIn with the same target audience in mind. To thank the participants for their time and to increase engagement, we raffled four 15 euro gift cards among the participants.

In total, 16 participants signed up for the experiment. The most experienced participants have programmed for 12 years. The other participants are relatively equally distributed between 4 and 12 years. 31.3% of the participants work in industry as a software engineer, while the main occupation of the remaining participants is student or PhD student. All participants have an academic background. The current or highest education level of most participants is MSc (56.3%). The other participants were either BSc (25%) or PhD students (18.8%) at the time of the experiment.

The 16 participants consider themselves to be experienced software developers (4.0). They are experienced with developing Java applications (3.8 in IntelliJ) (3.9), Some of the participants have experience developing software professionally (3.4), whereas others do not have any experience in this area.

The participants are less experienced with software testing (3.6). We observe that some of the participants indicated to be very experienced in testing, while others indicated to not be experienced at all. The results on the experience with CI show a different trend. The participants rate themselves as highly experienced in using CI build tools (like Travis CI, GitHub Actions, or Jenkins; 4.2) and inspecting the output logs when a build fails (3.9).

To present the Likert-scale results we show the average score indicated by the purple-colored dot. The small bar chart gives a rough indication of the distribution of the answers that the participants gave.
A minority of the participants have some previous experience with the software project (2.4).  

3.5 Experiment Execution
The experiment is approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of our university and follows the guidelines set by the committee. At the start of the experiment, participants read and sign an informed consent form indicating that they understand what data will be collected and how it will be used. Before we conducted the experiment, we first ran a pilot to evaluate the design of the experiment and improved several aspects of our design and the tools we used. We conducted the experiment in March 2021 for three weeks in multiple sessions per day. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiment was fully remote. All sessions were individual and guided by an observer. During a session, the observer took notes of interesting things that happened or were said during the experiment and timed the assignments. A session took about 90 minutes, depending on the time needed to fill out the questionnaires or solve the assignments.
We cannot determine that there is an improvement in the failure-fixing time, except for assignment 4a. The failure-fixing time for the assignments of category four is 12.1%. Because of our crossover design, test (a) shows a performance decrease, on average, the performance of category one-three and 10 minutes for category four. We observe a difference of category four is 13.4%. For category two, the average score of having to run the test locally to get more information from 3.4 to 1.6. Also, the perceived time spent on finding out which test(s) failed dropped from 2.1 to 1.2, on average.

4.2 Usefulness of The Tool

After our experiments, we asked the participants how useful they found the different informational elements of TestAxis. The majority of the participants find that the information provided by TestAxis in the various features helps them understand a failure better and fix it more quickly (4.4). The participants consider the details tab containing meta-information such as the test name and the interactive stack trace (shown in Figure 3), as well as the changed code under test tab (as shown in Figure 6) most useful (4.2 and 4.4, respectively). Participant 5 even indicates that it is “all I need to see the name of the [failing] test but not much more”. However, the participants rate the usefulness of the test code feature slightly lower (3.9). Participant 8 mentioned that the test code tab may be unnecessary since there is already an “Open Test” button that opens the test in the main window of the IDE. The participants signal the value of highlighting changes in the code under test tab and consider it a very important part of the code under test feature (4.6). Participant 13 explained why they think this feature is relevant: “The highlights of the code under test are very important since that’s what you would normally do manually by thinking about what changed and what the test could have covered. And this shows you everything automatically without any margin for error.”

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of our investigation is to gauge whether providing context about test failures in the local IDE helps developers fix broken CI builds faster. We implemented TestAxis and conducted an experiment where we asked developers to solve test failures that require different kinds of contextual information. In this section, we analyze the results of our experiment, such as whether the performance improvements are statistically significant, discuss the implications of our results and propose answers to our research questions.

5.1 What is the influence of presenting the test outcomes and metadata on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?

We designed the assignments of the first category to be solvable with only the meta-information (the name and stack trace of the failing test) presented in TestAxis (see Figure 3). The first category contains simple test failures where the issue can be spotted in the stack trace alone. We found that the average time participants needed to solve the two assignments decreased by 13.4% when using TestAxis. Also, the participants indicated they spent considerably less time figuring out which tests failed with the help of TestAxis. Moreover, TestAxis reduced the need to run the failing tests locally to get more feedback. We thus see indications that presenting a test failure in the IDE over a CI build log has a positive influence on the failure-fixing time.

Figure 10: The failure-fixing time in seconds of both the without and with variant of all assignments. The first six assignments have a time limit of 5 minutes. For the last two assignments, the limit is 10 minutes.
5.2 What is the influence of presenting the test code on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?

The second assignment category featured test failures due to issues in the test code. Figure 4 demonstrates how TestAxis presents the test code. Many participants hit the time limit in this category, 10 participants for the assignments without TestAxis and 5 for the assignments with. This could be caused by the participants focusing more on the code under test than on the test code, which they indicated in the post-assignment survey. The results show an average improvement of the failure-fixing time of 13.8%. We see clear indications that TestAxis helps to solve assignments where the issue is in the test code more quickly.

5.3 What is the influence of presenting the code under test, where the changed code is highlighted, on the time a developer needs to fix a failing test?

We evaluate the effect of showing changed code under test (RQ3, Figure 6) in both the third and fourth category. In the third category, we observe an average improvement in the failure-fixing time of 48.6%. The test cases in this category are straightforward, and the issues are in one of the few highlighted code fragments of the changed and covered code shown by TestAxis. The suggestions of potential locations of the issue cut down the number of lines of code to inspect drastically compared to inspecting the full code change diff, which is likely the explanation for the significant increase in failure-fixing performance. The participants have also indicated that they spent the most time on the code under test while figuring out the cause of the failure.

The fourth category consists of two assignments where the same high-level end-to-end test fails, and the participants must find out why. These assignments are more complex than the third category and require a deeper investigation by the developer. Even though we saw an average performance improvement of 12.1%, the results for the two assignments in this category show different trends. Assignment 4b showed an improvement in performance while assignment 4a showed a decrease in performance. By the design of the study, we can thus not conclude anything about the results for this category. We found that the more experienced developers that perform the assignment with TestAxis need more time to solve the assignment than the less experienced developers, contrary to the other assignments. A possible explanation could be that the less experienced participants find it easier to adopt new features, such as the changed code under test feature, into their workflow, whereas for more experienced developers it may be difficult to fit a new type of feature in their existing tool belt.

We see clear indications that showing the changed code under test positively influences the failure-fixing time for simple cases. Our results are inconclusive about more complex cases.

5.4 Statistical Significance of the Measured Performance Improvements

In Section 4.1, we present the performance results of all assignment variants. For all assignments except one, we observe an improvement of the average failure-fixing time when using TestAxis. We use the two-tailed Mann-Whitney U test [22] to analyze whether these improvements are statistically significant. We reject our null hypothesis “there is no difference between performing an assignment without or with TestAxis” when p-value ≤ 0.05.

Table 1 shows the U values per assignment. It also shows p-values using a normal approximation. For assignment 3a and 3b we can reject our null hypothesis and conclude that the improvements are statistically significant. For all other assignments, we cannot conclude that the performance improvements are statistically significant.

Table 1: Statistical significance of the observed performance improvements.
5.5 Impact of Running Tests Locally and Determining Which Test Failed

In all assignments with TestAxis, the participants rarely had to run a failing test locally in the IDE to get more information. Also, the time needed to find out which tests failed dropped significantly in the assignments with TestAxis compared to the ones without. These two general findings contributed in almost all assignments to an improvement of the failure-fixing time when using TestAxis.

The participants think that TestAxis solves a real problem and that it would save them time. Most participants would make TestAxis part of their workflow, one of the participants indicated that they would consider implementing it in their workflow "as is" and that they would "not add much info further as I think its strength lies in the clean and concise overview". Overall, the participants find TestAxis useful in helping them understand test failures better and fix them more quickly. One of the participants described their experience as "I thought it was super useful during the experiments. I much rather preferred using TestAxis over the traditional CI logs on GitHub. What TestAxis does, in my opinion, is recreate the steps I manually take on a GitHub pull request to identify a failing test, and it does so in the IDE so I don't have to switch tabs and interrupt my workflow."

5.6 To what extent do developers consider contextual CI information in the IDE useful?

After the assignments, we asked the participants about the usefulness of TestAxis and the different features they used. The participants consider all three kinds of contextual information useful, with the changed code under test feature being the most useful. The participants think that TestAxis solves a real problem and that it would save them time. Most participants would make TestAxis part of their workflow, one of the participants indicated that they would consider implementing it in their workflow "as is" and that they would "not add much info further as I think its strength lies in the clean and concise overview". Overall, the participants find TestAxis useful in helping them understand test failures better and fix them more quickly. One of the participants described their experience as "I thought it was super useful during the experiments. I much rather preferred using TestAxis over the traditional CI logs on GitHub. What TestAxis does, in my opinion, is recreate the steps I manually take on a GitHub pull request to identify a failing test, and it does so in the IDE so I don't have to switch tabs and interrupt my workflow."

6 THREATS TO VALIDITY

To support the credibility of our results, we outline the threats to the validity of our user experiment.

6.1 Internal Validity

Internal validity indicates the reliability of the cause-and-effect relationship between the introduction of TestAxis and the observed effects in the results.

While analyzing our results, we observed a learning effect. Our participants were able to solve assignments quicker at the end of the experiment. We expected this while designing the experiment and mitigated the impact by randomizing the order of the assignments. We base the results for each assignment on both early and late executions in the experiment. Half the participants got the without TestAxis variant of a category first, and the other half got the with variant of the category first.

Creating two assignments that are similar enough to directly compare is very complex (see Section 3.3). To mitigate this, we compare the results of the without variant of a specific assignment against the with variant, executed by another group. As then the group composition could influence the results, we only consider there to be an effect of using TestAxis when the results show the same trend for both assignments of a category.

Another threat is whether the participants felt comfortable giving their honest opinions. The participants knew that their activity was observed while conducting the assignments and filling out the questionnaires. This could cause a Hawthorne effect, participants answering questions more positively [1]. While it is not possible to show that this was not the case, we do observe negative answers to some of the questions. This suggests that the participants felt at ease and comfortable sharing their opinions.

In the experiment, TestAxis is used for a short time. A longer study of teams working with the tool in real projects is needed to measure its true impact. The short time is not long enough to incorporate a new feature such as the changed code under test feature into one’s workflow. Participant 14 confirmed this by saying "For the best experience, requires a user to learn the intuitions of the tool."

6.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity is concerned with the degree to which a test actually measures the construct(s) it claims to be testing. The performance results are based on quantitative data, the duration of assignment executions. The timing results may be influenced by different behavior induced by the experiment environment. However, the participants agree with the statement that they used the same tactics during the assignments without TestAxis as they would have done outside the experiment. In a follow-up study, a more objective approach that monitors IDE usage, such as WatchDog [5], could be considered to get a better indication of which tasks are most influenced by the usage of TestAxis.

6.3 External Validity

The external validity is concerned with the generalizability of the results. As shown in Section 3.4, the participants are a diverse group with mixed backgrounds. However, the group size is relatively small, which may cause individual differences in their background to have a greater effect on the results than in a larger group of participants. How similar the test failures in the assignments are to real test failures is an important factor for the generalizability of our results.
While the example project JPacman is smaller than most applications, it does feature an extensive test suite, modern build pipeline, and design practices such as dependency injection. The short duration of the experiment requires a project that can be understood quickly. The participants agree that JPacman allowed for interesting cases that were suitable to answer the questions. The cases we designed mimic test failures that could happen in any type of software project. The participants neither agree nor disagree that the assignments are similar to the ones they encounter in their own projects, indicating that the generalizability of the assignments is a threat to the validity of the results.

7 RELATED WORK

CI builds and test failures are well-explored topics. This section discusses a selection of the research done in these areas that is related to our work.

7.1 Assistance in Fixing Failing Tests

Beller et al. monitor the behavior of developers after observing a test failure [6]. Their results show that in more than 60% of the cases, a developer starts reading the code under test. Another 17% reads the test code first. However, after 5 seconds, a significant number of users switch focus from the IDE to another window. A possible explanation is that developers reach out to external resources to help solve the issue.

The need for such external resources could be fulfilled by providing more context around the test failure. Zhang et al. proposed an approach that explains the reasons for test failures through comments in the test code [42]. For example, it adds comments indicating which exception is thrown by a specific line. It also suggests fixes by mutating the failing tests to see if it can find a variant that would pass. Using a statistical algorithm, they determine and comment the production code most suspicious of causing the failure.

ReAssert also mutates test code to try to make the test pass [15]. The tool suggests mutations that result in a passing test as repair options. It can, for example, replace literals and change assertions. This method only works if the test code is no longer in line with the production code. If the failure is caused by a regression, mutating the test code would capture the wrong behavior of the production code.

7.2 CI Build Results in the IDE

There exist several IDE extensions that show the status of CI builds, sometimes with additional information. The plugins have different characteristics. Table 2 shows all IDE plugins displaying CI builds that we identified in the JetBrains and Eclipse Marketplace. Three of the plugins notify the developers of build status updates [9, 30, 31]. Half of the plugins only show raw information of the builds (like the status or the logs) [3, 23, 31], while the others also interpret the builds and show the test results [9, 30, 39].

Moreover, the TeamCity [30] plugin and the Hudson/Jenkins Mylyn Builds Connector [39] also provide additional insights. Table 3 shows a comparison between the test insights features of these two plugins and TestAxis. TeamCity displays tests failed and highlights stack traces. It also offers the ability to easily run a test locally. The Hudson/Jenkins Mylyn Builds Connector plugin shows the test results but also provides insights on execution times and code changes made for this build.

TestAxis also gives these insights. It shows an interactive stack trace together with execution details such as the run time. While Hudson/Jenkins Mylyn Builds Connector only shows a list of changes, TestAxis incorporates these changes in the changed code under test feature that both shows which code fragments were changed and touched by the test. Furthermore, TestAxis also provides easy access to the test code to understand the intent of the test or to spot mistakes in the test itself. TestAxis is not limited to a specific CI service and can be included in the build process of any CI tool.

One might expect that showing CI test results in the IDE is not needed because developers can just execute the tests in their IDE that shows a good interface to review and inspect failing tests. However, it turns out that developers actually do not often execute tests in their IDE [6, 7]. Beller et al. also mention that “Despite the tool overhead and a possibly slower reaction time, our low results on test executions in the IDE suggest that developers increasingly prefer such more complex setups [in which tests are run on CI servers] to manually executing their tests in the IDE.” and continue by recommending that IDE developers should improve CI integration [6].

7.3 The Augmented IDE

Our work also lies in the context of integrating additional sources of information within the IDE. A key goal here is to improve software understanding and development, and also reducing the context switches between tools that software engineers typically use. A notable example is the work of Holmes and Begel: Deep Intelisense [21], an IDE plugin that links bug reports, emails, code changes to source code entities. Furthermore, the Eclipse plugin Hipikat [14], tries to assist newcomers by recommending problem reports, newsgroup articles, etc. related to the task at hand.

Other tools tackle the challenge of reducing the context switching from IDE to web browser. For example, Ponzanelli et al. bring Stack Overflow into the IDE [25]. Another Eclipse plugin, Fish-tail [29] harnesses programmer’s interactions history to bring relevant web resources into the IDE. Similarly, TestKnight is a plug-in for IntelliJ that helps developers engineer developer tests by (1) providing suggestions on which parts should still be tested, offering boilerplate test code solutions, and (3) adding support for copying and pasting test cases with suggestions on which parts to change [12].

8 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Inspecting the results of a failing test in a CI build is a tedious process. It often requires developers to manually inspect and scroll through hundreds to thousands of lines of log output, while running tests inside an IDE offers specific, detailed, and interactive feedback on the test results. TestAxis brings CI test results to the IDE and offers a similar experience to running a test locally. Moreover, it exploits the change and coverage information available on the CI to offer additional support while inspecting test failures. In this paper, we explored how three different kinds of contextual information reduce the time needed to fix a test failing on CI.
Our results show that it is helpful to present the test results and the test code in the environment of the developer. For simple failures, we saw a statistically significant improvement in failure fixing time when presenting the code under test which was changed since the last successful build. For complex failures, our results were diverging, possibly because more experienced developers took more time to incorporate the new feature into their workflow, or because the assignments were too difficult for our participants in the scope of our experiment. Overall, the developers judged TestAxis as a useful tool which they would integrate into their workflow and emphasized the power of the unique presentation of changed code under test. A central advantage of TestAxis is the combination of information available on the CI and the familiar, local presentation in the IDE. This enables us to give developers powerful insights into their test failures.

While our study has shown that TestAxis can have a positive effect on the type of cases we presented, more work is needed to confirm its usefulness and performance improvement in real-life projects. Due to the design of our study, we could only see indications that there is an effect after introducing TestAxis but not that this effect is caused by TestAxis. Our experiment should be repeated as a controlled experiment with a larger sample size or as a longitudinal study on a real software project to achieve stronger conclusions. Further, TestAxis could be extended to provide additional context for builds that fail for other reasons than tests, such as dependency errors or static analysis warnings. A combination with links to the code or automatic fixing suggestions could also help leverage the unique combination of CI and IDE in these cases.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was partially funded by the Dutch science foundation NWO through the Vici “TestShift” grant (No. VIC.182.032) and conducted as part of Casper Boone’s master thesis [11].

REFERENCES


Table 2: IDE plugins that show CI build statuses and/or results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>IDE</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>CI Service</th>
<th>Build Status</th>
<th>Build Logs</th>
<th>Notifications</th>
<th>Test Results</th>
<th>Test Insights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TeamCity [30]</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>778.6K</td>
<td>TeamCity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkins Control Plugin [9]</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>204.7K</td>
<td>Jenkins</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IntelliJ GitLab Pipeline Viewer [31]</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>7.2K</td>
<td>GitLab</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Github Tools [23]</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>6.3K</td>
<td>Travis CI / CircleCI</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Github Actions [3]</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>3.1K</td>
<td>Github Actions</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson/Jenkins Mylyn Builds Connector [39]</td>
<td>Eclipse</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Jenkins</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TestAxis</td>
<td>IntelliJ</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Comparison of IDE plugins with test insights.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Stack Traces</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Indirectly through JUnit view</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display of Test Code</td>
<td>Line only</td>
<td>Link only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code Under Test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code Changes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed Code Under test</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Build Log Inspection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indirectly through JUnit view</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rerun Test</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Indirectly through JUnit view</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported CI Providers</td>
<td>TeamCity</td>
<td>Jenkins</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>