OpenSSL 3.0.0: An exploratory case study
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ABSTRACT
Context: The OpenSSL project released version 3.0.0 in September 2021. This release was a departure from previous versions of OpenSSL in several ways, including a new versioning system and the first use of public software design documents.

Objective: The goal is to compare code quality of version 3.0.0 with the previous major release using the GrimoireLab toolset.

Method: We developed a new backend for Graal, a component of GrimoireLab, to use the cmetrics C code metrics tool. We also modified Graal to add the capability to perform monthly samples of a project. We collected monthly snapshots of the two branches of OpenSSL and computed code metrics for each snapshot.

Results: While the code base grew substantially in each version, version complexity and use of problematic language features both decreased. The only negative indicator of code quality was an increase in style inconsistency.

CCS CONCEPTS
- Software and its engineering → Designing software; Software design engineering; Software reliability.

KEYWORDS
mining software repositories, software metrics

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION
The OpenSSL library is a key component of Internet infrastructure. While the project was neglected by its many users prior to the discovery of the Heartbleed vulnerability [5], support from the Linux Foundation’s Core Infrastructure Initiative allowed rapid improvement in code quality and security after 2014 with the release of versions 1.0.2 and 1.1.0 [12].

OpenSSL 3.0.0, released on September 7, 2021, is the first release to use OpenSSL’s new versioning system [1], in which the first digit indicates a major release, the second digit a minor release, and the third digit a patch to fix a bug or vulnerability. Prior OpenSSL versions used all three digits to indicate the major and minor release. Patches were indicated by a letter following the version number. The major release immediately prior to 3.0.0 was 1.1.1, which added support for TLS 1.3 and several new cryptographic algorithms like SHA3. Version numbers beginning with 2.0 had been previously used for OpenSSL’s FIPS (Federal Information Processing Standards) 140 module, so they were skipped in the new versioning scheme.

The goal of this case study is to understand how development of OpenSSL 3.0.0 differed from development of the previous major release, 1.1.1. Version 3.0.0 was the first release of OpenSSL built with public design documents [9]. The release announcement described two additional improvements, including a 94% increase in documentation and a 54% increase in the amount of test code [2].

OpenSSL 3.0.0 introduced providers, a new abstraction for collections of algorithm implementations [10]. Four providers are included: Default, Legacy (for older algorithms), Engines (with a compatibility layer for engines from older OpenSSL versions), and FIPS. Providers make algorithms available through OpenSSL’s high-level API. Low-level APIs supported by older versions were deprecated. Many smaller changes were made, including changes to data structures and error handling.

This study compares how code quality changed during the development of OpenSSL versions 1.1.1 and 3.0.0 using static code metrics. Our choice of metrics was guided in part by Lehman’s laws of software evolution [6]. We analyze the second law (increasing complexity) using code complexity metrics and the sixth law (continuing growth) using code size metrics. We also examine language feature use and style metrics. Our research questions were:

RQ1 How did the size and complexity of OpenSSL evolve differently during the development of versions 1.1.1 and 3.0.0?

RQ2 How did the use of programming language features and coding style evolve differently between the two versions?

2 APPROACH
We used the GrimoireLab [4] toolset to compute software metrics. Graal is the component of GrimoireLab that performs source code analysis. In order to collect a broader variety of code metrics than were currently supported by Graal [3], we developed a new backend for Graal to support the cmetrics tool 1. This tool has been previously used to study OpenSSL [12].

We discovered a bug in Graal’s unit test suite that caused many unit tests to return successful results regardless of the actual test results. We submitted a pull request to fix this bug 2.

Grala provides options to select commits by git branch, date ranges, and files. Due to the many thousands of commits made during OpenSSL 3.0.0 development, we needed to sample a subset of commits. We modified Graal to add the capability to select the

1https://github.com/chaoss/grimoirelab-graal/pull/110
2https://github.com/chaoss/grimoirelab-graal/pull/103
first commit made each month, so that we could construct monthly
time series for each version. We plan to submit a pull request for
this feature.

We examined both versions of OpenSSL from creation of the
version’s branch creation to the public release of the version. The
OpenSSL 3.0.0 branch was created on the same day that version
1.1.1 was released. There are 26 months of OpenSSL 1.1.1 data
and 37 months of OpenSSL 3.0.0 data. We analyzed snapshots of
monthly code metrics starting from the creation of each branch
to the announcement of a final, public release in git commit
messages.

3 EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

OpenSSL 3.0.0 is a significant redesign of OpenSSL, focused on
the new providers abstraction. However, it retains backwards compati-
ility, deprecating but not removing low level APIs and retaining
the Legacy provider to maintain access to old algorithms. This
resulted in OpenSSL 3.0.0 being the largest version of OpenSSL, with
614,731 lines of code. It is 42.6% larger than OpenSSL 1.1.1, with its
431,113 lines of code. Significantly expanding a project while im-
proving code quality is a challenge. We examine how well OpenSSL
3.0.0 rose to that challenge through our two research questions
below.

3.1 Size and Complexity

Our first research question focuses on the how the evolution of
code size and complexity differed between versions 1.1.1 and 3.0.0
of OpenSSL. We find that while OpenSSL 1.1.1 substantially in-
creased the size of the library, OpenSSL 3.0.0 added almost three
times as much code. In both major releases, the number of func-
tions increased substantially while mean function length decreased,
showing an increased use of smaller functions. Many programmers
find that smaller functions are easier to understand [7].

Although both versions added a large amount of code, code com-
plexity decreased over the course of their development. The mean
cyclomatic complexity changed by -0.59 (-9.8%) in version 1.1.1 and
by -0.52 (-9.6%) in version 3.0.0. The mean Halstead complexity
changed by -187 (-16.2%) in version 1.1.1 and by -269.37 (-27.9%) in
version 3.0.0. Code size and complexity metric changes over the
development of both releases are summarized in Table 1. It seems
plausible that the greater design effort focused on version 3.0.0
allowed code complexity to decrease while code size substantially
increased.

3.2 Language Feature Use

Our second research question focuses on the how the evolution of
programming language feature usage and coding style differed be-
tween versions 1.1.1 and 3.0.0 of OpenSSL. We examined language
feature metrics as counts and densities. Densities refer to the count
of a language feature per thousand lines of code. Normalizing met-
rics by lines of code allows us to make fair comparisons between
the differently sized code bases.

An empirical study of GitHub projects suggested that use of
goto for specific purposes like error handling was considered good
practice by open source developers [8]. However, using C prepro-
cessor conditionals for portability has been blamed for increasing
the difficulty of reading and maintaining code [11]. Changes in both
features over the development of both versions are summarized in
Table 2.

![Figure 1: Preprocessor Conditional Density](image)

Use of goto statements increased in both absolute numbers and
density for both releases. The density of goto statements increases
by 3.2% in version 1.1.1 and 4.2% in version 3.0.0 over the course of
their development. Usage of goto in OpenSSL is focused on error
handling, as approximately 80% of goto labels in both versions are
er. The next two most common labels, end and done, make up
another 10% of usage, further supporting the argument that the vast
majority of goto statements are forward jumps to handle errors or
deallocate resources.
While the use of C preprocessor directives increased in absolute terms, the number of such directives compared to lines of code decreased for both versions, as we can see in Table 2. However, the density of include directives increased slightly in version 1.1.1 (1.8%) and substantially (17.8%) in version 3.0.0. Combined with the increase in the number of files, this points to the code base being refactored into a larger number of modules in version 3.0.0. The use of potentially problematic preprocessor conditionals decreased in both version 1.1.1 (-2.7%) and 3.0.0 (-7.3%). While the trend of preprocessor conditional use was generally downwards, we can notice peaks and troughs during the development process in Figure 1. There are seven commits in the 3.0.0 branch that mention preprocessor conditions between September 2019 and March 2020. One describes staging a change but preventing it from taking effect by using preprocessor statements, which caused a short term increase in preprocessor conditionals that ended once the conditionals preventing the change were removed.

3.3 Style Consistency

The cmetrics package computes a style inconsistency metric. This metric measures inconsistency for 19 style rules. For each way to format a particular construct, it measures the times the rule is applied in the one way (e.g., adding a space before a brace) and the times the rule is applied in the other way (e.g., omitting the space).

OpenSSL reduced style inconsistency tremendously in 2015 from 57.0 to 4.0 by automatically reformattting the code base [12]. Since 2015, style inconsistency has drifted consistently upwards. During development of OpenSSL 1.1.1, style inconsistency increased by 10.4% from 9.93 to 10.95. Style inconsistency increased more rapidly during the development of OpenSSL 3.0.0, with a total increase of 32.5% to a final value of 14.4. The evolution of inconsistency shown in Figure 2 show almost continual increases, especially in version 3.0.0.

4 CONCLUSION

We compared the evolution of OpenSSL versions 1.1.1 and 3.0.0 using a new backend that we developed for Graal to compute static code metrics with cmetrics. OpenSSL 3.0.0 was developed using public design documents and a focus on more documentation and unit tests. We observe substantial improvements in code quality during the development of 3.0.0 even as 183,605 lines of code were added, which is three times the number of lines added for 1.1.1.

Code complexity decreased for both versions, even as code size increased. Mean Halstead complexity decreased by 27.9% in version 3.0.0 and by 16.2% in 1.1.1. OpenSSL 3.0.0 showed substantially larger increases in the number of files (42.6% compared to 16.3%) and #include statement density (17.8% compared to 1.8%) than 1.1.1. These changes point to the code base being refactored into larger number of modules. The use of potentially problematic preprocessor conditionals decreased faster in version 3.0.0 compared to 1.1.1 (7.3% compared to 2.7%) suggesting that version 3.0.0 is using safer techniques for portability. Style inconsistency increased for both versions, with a noticeably larger increase for version 3.0.0 (32.5% compared to 10.4%).

Future work includes use of new data sources to help connect design documents to observed changes in code quality. We did not have time to examine the pull requests and issues, which may show connections between design and code that could not be found in commit messages and mailing lists. GrimoireLab supports accessing both types of data. Another data source for future consideration are additional code metric tools supported by Graal. We also want to deepen our investigation of why code metrics have changed. Static code metrics can change due to new programming language features and language usage, as well as from modifications to the software engineering process.

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REFERENCES