A Short Introduction to the GXL Software Exchange Format

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Abstract

GXL (Graph Exchange Language) is designed to be a standard exchange format for information that is derived from software. This exchange is done by representing the information as a graph and transcribing the graph to XML. This paper presents an example of a graph representing program information and shows how such a graph is encoded in XML The syntax of GXL is given by an XML DTD. The form of GXL graphs is given by a schema (an UML class-diagram) which in turn can be exchanged as a GXL graph.

1. Introduction

This paper gives a brief introduction to the GXL (Graph Exchange Language) software exchange format (SEF) [Ebert et al. 1999], [Holt et al. 2000]. GXL is designed to be a standard for exchanging information derived from programs, and more generally for exchanging information which is conveniently represented as a graph. GXL is represented in XML. We give an example of a diagram that represents information about a program and shows how that information is translated to GXL and hence to XML. As well, the syntax of GXL is given in terms of DTD (Document Type Definition) [W3C, 1998].

2. Data as Typed Graphs

Figure 1 shows a graph that represents a fragment on a program, in which procedure *P* calls procedure *Q* and references variable *V*. As well, procedure *Q* references variable W. Procedure *P* is located in file *main.c* while *Q* is located in *test.c*. Variable *V* is declared on line 225 while *W* is declared on line 316. The calls and references in the program occur on various source lines in the program (lines 127, 42 and 27).

It is common to represent data about software as diagrams similar to Figure 1. Such a diagram is an attributed (*File* and *Line* are attributes), typed (*Proc* and *Var* are types), directed graph, or simply a *typed graph* for short. This mathematical model (typed graphs) provides a clear meaning of the data we are exchanging, aside from any particular way we choose to encode the data as a stream of bytes.

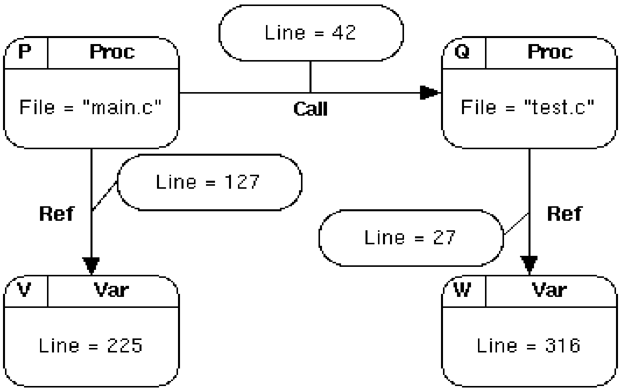

Figure 1. Sample typed graph with attributes

3. Representing a Graph in XML

Since XML has become a standard for transmitting streams of data, we have chosen to encode GXL diagrams in XML. As an example, Figure 2 represents the graph from Figure 1 as written in XML (using the GXL standard).

As can be seen in Figure 2, each node is described within the tagging constructs **<node>** and **</node>**. For example, lines 2-4 in the figure specify that node *P* of type *Proc* has a *File* attribute whose value is *main.c*.

Lines 14-16 specify that edge (*P*, *Q*) of type *Call* has a *Line* attribute whose value is 42. In general each node or edge can have any number of attributes.

```
<gxl>
<node id="P" type="Proc">
        <attr name="File" value="main.c" />
</node>
<node id="Q" type="Proc">
        <attr name="File" value="test.c" />
</node>
<node id="V" type="Var">
         <attr name="Line" value="225" />
</node>
<node id="W" type="Var">
        <attr name="Line" value="316" />
</node>
<edge begin="P" end="Q" type="Call">
        <attr name="Line" value="42" />
</edge>
<edge begin="P" end="V" type="Ref">
        <attr name="Line" value="127" />
</edge>
<edge begin="Q" end="W" type="Ref">
        <attr name="Line" value="316" />
</edge>
</gxl>
```

Figure 2. Graph in Figure 1 represented in XML (as an GXL document). The nodes (*P*, *Q*, *V* and *W*) and edges (*P*,*Q*), (*P*, *V*) and (*Q*, *W*) are represented along with their types and attributes

Although we will not illustrate it here, GXL can handle different programming languages, e.g., C++ and Cobol, and can handle various levels of granularity, e.g., Abstract Syntax Trees to Architecture. This flexibility is based on the fact that GXL can represent any typed graph.

4. Syntax of GXL

We used the DTD (Document Type Definition) notation to specify the syntax of GXL's XML streams. Figure 3 gives a simplified version of the DTD for GXL. The complete GXL DTD representing the current state of standardizing GXL can be found at http://www.gupro.de/GXL.

Line 1 of Figure 3 specifies that a GXL stream consists of zero or more *node* and *edge* descriptions. Lines 2-4 state that the parameters in a GXL tag must specify the schema for the graph (this will be discussed below) and must specify whether there are to be distinct identifiers on edges. Line 5 states that a *node* has zero or more *attr*ibutes. Lines 6-9 states that each node has a required *id* and optional (IMPLIED) *type* and *edgeorder* attributes. Similarly, the final 9 lines of Figure 3 specify the syntax of edges as they are represented in GXL XML streams.

```
<!ELEMENT gxl (node | edge)* >
<!ATTLIST gxl
    schema      CDATA         #REQUIRED
    edgeids     (true | false)#REQUIRED >
<!ELEMENT node (attr)* >
<!ATTLIST node
    id          ID            #REQUIRED
    type        CDATA         #IMPLIED
    edgeorder   IDREFS        #IMPLIED >
<!ELEMENT edge (attr)* >
<!ATTLIST edge
    id          ID            #IMPLIED
    type        CDATA         #IMPLIED
    begin       IDREF         #REQUIRED
    end         IDREF         #REQUIRED >
<!ELEMENT attr EMPTY >
<!ATTLIST attr
    name        CDATA         #REQUIRED
    value       CDATA         #IMPLIED >
```

Figure 3. Simplified DTD specifying the syntax of the XML stream for GXL.

5. Schemas for Typed Graphs

There are many kinds of graphs that we wish to exchange, with various types of nodes and edges and differing attributes. To handle this range of variability we used E/R diagrams (i. e. UML class diagrams) which we call *schemas*, such as the one given in Figure 4.

The GXL schema in Figure 4 specifies the form of graphs such as the one shown in Figures 1. This schema specifies that nodes must have the type *Proc* or *Var* and edges must have the type *Call* or *Ref*. *Proc* nodes have a *string File* attribute, while *Var* nodes have a *string Line* attribute. Both *Call* and *Ref* edges have *int*eger *Line* attributes. *Call* edges connect *Proc* nodes to *Proc* nodes and *Ref* edges connect *Proc* nodes to *Var* edges. In a similar way, graphs with other kinds of types, attributes and connectivity can be specified with other schemas.

Since a schema is itself a typed graph, it is can be encoded in XML just like any other graph. Using this encoding, the GXL notation allows schemas to be exchanged along with actual data. This exchanging of schemas allows tools to dynamically configure themselves to handle the many different kinds of graphs that are useful in software analysis or in other fields of study.

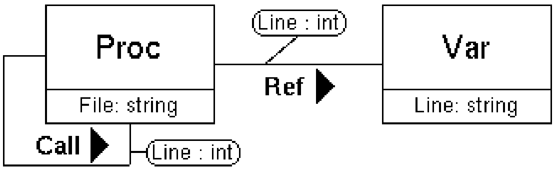

Figure 4. Schema (class diagram) for graphs of the form of the one in Figure 1

6. Conclusion

This position paper has used examples to give a short introduction to the GXL software exchange format. Since GXL is convenient for encoding any kind of typed, attributed, directed graph, it should be flexible enough to handle a wide range of source languages, levels of granularity, etc. Furthermore GXL is a standardized exchange format for any graph based application.

In the ICSE 2000 Workshop on Standard Exchange Formats (WoSEF 2000) [Sim et al., 2000] GXL was accepted as possible standard exchange format by numerous research groups working in the domain of software reengineering and graph transformation from industries (e.g. Bell Canada (CA), IBM Center for Advanced Studies (CA), Mahindra British Telecom (IN), Nokia Research Center (CA), Philips Research (NL)) and academics (e.g. groups at Universities of Bw München (DE), Koblenz (DE), Paderborn (DE), Stuttgart (DE), Victoria (CA), Waterloo (CA)). More details about GXL can be found in [Holt et al. 2000].

References

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[W3C, 1998] **W3C**: XML Working Group, Extensible Markup Language (XML) 1.0, W3C Recommendation, (http://www.w3.org/ TR/1998/REC-xml-19980210), February, 1998.