

Towards Accessible Integrated Formal Reasoning Environments for Protocol Design

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Abstract

Computer science researchers in the programming languages and formal verification communities have produced a variety of automated tools and techniques for assisting formal reasoning tasks. However, while there exist notable successes in utilizing these tools to develop safe and secure software and hardware, both leading-edge advances and basic techniques (such as model checking, state space search, type checking, logical inference and verification, computation of congruence closures, non-interference enforcement, and so on) remain underutilized by large populations of end-users that may benefit from them when they engage in formal reasoning tasks within their own application domains. This may be in part because (1) these tools and techniques are not readily accessible to end-users who are not experts in formal systems or are simply not aware of what is available and how it can be utilized, and (2) these tools and techniques are only valuable when used in conjunction with one another and with appropriate domain-specific libraries and databases.

Motivated by these circumstances, we present our ongoing efforts, built on earlier work in developing user-friendly formal verification tools, to develop a platform for assembling, instantiating, and deploying user-friendly, interactive, integrated formal reasoning environments that can assist users engaged in routine domain-specific formal reasoning tasks in application domains. This infrastructure encompasses a programming language, compilers, and other tools for building up from components, instantiating with domain-specific formal content, and finally delivering such environments in the form of ready-to-use web-based applications that can run entirely within a standard web browser. We describe current efforts to use this platform to instantiate an environment the application domain of correct network protocol design.

1 Introduction

Computer science researchers in the programming languages and formal verification communities have produced a wide variety of automated tools and techniques for assisting formal reasoning tasks. However, while there exist notable successes in utilizing these tools to develop safe and secure software and hardware, both leading-edge advances and basic techniques (such as model checking, state space search, type checking, logical inference and verification, computation of congruence closures, non-interference enforcement, and so on) remain underutilized

by large populations of end-users that may benefit from them when they engage in formal reasoning tasks within their own application domains. These populations include students and instructors, researchers, and experts working in particular application domains. This state of affairs may be a consequence of the fact that (1) many existing tools and techniques are not readily accessible to end-users who are not experts in formal systems or are not familiar with what is available and how it may be used, and that (2) these tools and techniques only become practically valuable when they can be used in conjunction with one another and with appropriate domain-specific libraries to engage in routine formal reasoning tasks.

Motivated by the current state of affairs, we present our ongoing efforts, built on earlier work in developing user-friendly formal verification tools [20, 19, 12], to develop a general-purpose platform and infrastructure for defining, implementing, instantiating, and delivering user-friendly, interactive, integrated formal reasoning environments (henceforward we will refer to these as *environments* for concision) that can assist users engaging in routine domain-specific formal reasoning tasks. This infrastructure encompasses a programming language, compilers, user-interface features, and other tools for building up from components, instantiating with domain-specific formal content, and finally delivering such environments in the form of ready-to-use web-based applications that can run entirely within a standard web browser.

In this work we begin to define what we consider to be a minimal collection of tools and conventions that are needed to implement and support an accessible integrated environment for a chosen application domain. In doing so, we develop prototypes of practical tools and conventions for this underlying infrastructure. Furthermore, we begin to develop a framework and context in which to raise new questions and problems associated with defining and implementing accessible integrated environments.

Accessibility of formal reasoning tools and practical integration of such tools can be treated as two complementary but orthogonal issues, and these issues can be addressed separately. However, we believe (and attempt to illustrate in this work) that addressing them simultaneously compels each effort to reinforce the other. Also focusing on the accessibility of integrated components rather than only on the integration of the components leads us to create tools to support fast and unique implementations of integrated components that enable user-friendly and practical delivery over the web of the resulting automated formal assistance capabilities. Likewise, also focusing on the integration of components rather than only on the accessibility of individual algorithms or tools leads us to build general-purpose interface features that are not necessarily limited to the idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses of particular tools and techniques (though they may expose and let users make tradeoffs between different tools based on their strengths and weaknesses). Thus, such interface features can be used for combinations of underlying components that may have different automated assistance capabilities and characteristics.

To illustrate more concretely our vision and to begin evaluating our efforts, we use an application domain in which end-users benefit not just by having an environment with an accessible interface, but also by having the ability to *integrate* multiple tools and techniques: safe and correct network protocol design.

2 Motivating Examples

We present several examples, drawn from the application domain of protocol design, illustrating how an accessible integrated formal reasoning environment may be used within this application domain. We do so to illustrate some of the key features that an environment should possess in order to support design and automated formal analysis of protocols.

For each example, we present the definition of the protocol and one or more properties that a protocol design may possess. A protocol designer may wish to check or confirm that a protocol design possesses this property using one or more automated or semi-automated formal reasoning assistance tools or techniques. In the final example in Section 2.3, we also present a possible language to be used by end-users to specify the protocol and the properties to be checked automatically using an integrated environment.

2.1 Stable Paths Problem (SPP) and Variants

The stable-paths problem captures the basic functionality of the BGP routing protocol. In the SPP, there is a common destination, for instance v_0 , and all nodes exchange their current path in order to reach v_0 . Considering local policies, each node chooses the best path for itself among those paths advertised by neighbors. Let $G = (V, E)$ be a simple, undirected graph where $v = \{0, 1, 2, \dots, n\}$ is the set of nodes and E is the set of edges. Node 0 is the destination or origin of the graph, where all the nodes want to reach it and find the best path to v_0 . For any node u , $peers(u) = \{w | \{u, w\} \in E\}$ is the set of peers for u . A path is either the empty path, ϵ , or a sequence of nodes, $(v_k v_{k-1} \dots v_1 v_0)$, $k \geq 0$, such that $\forall i, k \geq i > 0, \{v_i, v_{i-1}\} \in E$.

For each $v \in V$, \mathcal{P}^v denotes the set of permitted paths starting from v to the v_0 . If $P = (v v_k \dots v_1 0)$ is in \mathcal{P}^v , then the node v_k is the next hop of path P . $\mathcal{P} = \bigcup \mathcal{P}^v$.

For each $v \in V$, there is a non-negative, integer-values ranking function λ^v , defined over \mathcal{P}^v , which represents how node v ranks its permitted paths. If $P_1, P_2 \in \mathcal{P}^v$ and $\lambda^v(P_1) < \lambda^v(P_2)$, then p_2 is preferred over P_1 . Let $\Lambda = \{\lambda^v | v \in V - \{0\}\}$.

An instance of the Stable Paths Problem, $S = (G, \mathcal{P}, \Lambda)$, is a graph together with the permitted paths at each node and the ranking functions for each node. Let $S = (G, \mathcal{P}, \Lambda)$ be an instance of the Stable Paths Problem. A path assignment is a function π that maps each node to a permitted path $\pi(u) \in \mathcal{P}^u$. All possible permitted paths at u ($choices(\pi, u)$) is defined to be

$$choices(\pi, u) = \begin{cases} \{(u, v)\pi(v) | \{u, v\} \in E\} \cap \mathcal{P}^u, & (u \neq 0) \\ \{(0)\}, & o.w. \end{cases}$$

This set represents all possible permitted paths at u that can be formed by extending the paths assigned to the peers of u . Given a node u , suppose that W is a subset of the permitted paths \mathcal{P}^u such that each path in W has a distinct next hop. Then the best path in W is defined to be

$$best(W, u) = \begin{cases} P \in W \text{ with maximal } \lambda^u(P), & (W \neq \emptyset) \\ \epsilon, & o.w. \end{cases}$$

2.1.1 Properties.

The path assignment π is *stable at node u* if:

$$\pi(u) = best(choices(\pi, u), u).$$

2.2 Chord

Chord is a peer-to-peer *distributed hash table* (DHT) protocol consisting of N nodes, which support one operation: given a key, it maps the key to a node. Each node in a Chord network has a unique identifier which is an m -bit hash of its IP address. The nodes are arranged in a circle that has at most $N = 2^m$ nodes and every node has a *successor* and *predecessor* pointer.

The successor is the next node in the identifier circle and the predecessor is the previous node. Since the successor or predecessor nodes may leave the network, each node acquires a list of $\log N$ extra successors during the maintenance of Chord network. When a node joins the network, it contacts an existing node (the *auxiliary* node), requests the successor of that node and updates its successor. It also asks its successor for the successor's predecessor and sets its own predecessor to that node. During stabilization, a newly joined node will complete its full successor list. After stabilization, the node will notify its successor of its identity. In the notified node, if the notifier is closer than its own predecessor, the notified node will update its predecessor to notifier. In fact, all nodes call stabilize and notify periodically to update their list. If the successor of a node changes during stabilization (because of other nodes which left or just joined the network), the notification event will be invoked. Hence the successor node will be aware of its new predecessor.

When a node fails, it is no longer responsive to queries and hence it is *dead*. When a node becomes aware of a dead member, it will update the corresponding successor pointer to the immediate active node. Failures can create gaps and holes in the network. The purpose of the stabilization and notification events is to maintain the Chord ring in an ideal condition and circumvent these holes and gaps. An ideal instantiation of a Chord network of nodes should satisfy a collection of invariants.

2.2.1 Invariants

Valid Successor List. For any pairs of nodes w and v , if w 's successor list bypasses v , this means that v is not in the successor list of w 's immediate predecessors.

Ordered Appendages. In an appendage, all of the nodes should be ordered based on their identifiers.

Ordered Merges. When merging into the Chord ring, the merging appendage should be placed at the right position in the ring based on the identifiers.

2.2.2 Invariants Required for Correctness

At Least One Ring. In a Chord network, there should be at list one ring of nodes, and all of nodes are reachable from each other in that ring.

At Most One Ring. There should always be at most one ring in the network and the nodes should not break apart into two or more appendages.

Ordered Ring. All of the nodes in the ring are at the right position. In an other words, nodes are ordered based on their identifiers.

Connected Appendages. During the lifetime of Chord ring, an appendage stays connected to the ring.

2.2.3 Correctness

A Chord ring is correct if none of the aforementioned invariants are violated during lifetime of network.

2.3 Leadership Election

Suppose a protocol designer is defining a simple leadership election protocol over a unidirectional ring of processes, each of which has a unique numerical identifier. The process with the highest identifier should be elected leader at the end of a protocol execution. Each process first sends its own ID to its successor, then uses the following algorithm whenever it receives an ID from its predecessor (see Figure 1).

```
At start, send own ID to successor
Each round, send one ID in pool to successor
If ID is received from predecessor, compare to own ID:
  Higher: add to ID pool
  Lower: drop
  Equal: elect self as leader and stop sending messages
```

Figure 1: An example of a protocol to elect the process with the highest ID in a set of processes.

While a number of different properties can be checked automatically, consider two classes that the designer is interested in: relational, global properties and temporal/concurrency properties. The Alloy Analyzer [15], a model checker which accepts models and constraints written in the Alloy [13] language, can be used to check the former. SPIN [11], an explicit-state model checker that accepts models written in Promela and properties specified in Linear Temporal Logic (LTL) can be used to check the latter.

The correctness properties the designer wants to check using Alloy are:

- Is at most one process elected as leader?
- Is at least one process elected as leader?
- Is the process with the highest identifier always elected leader?
- Can a process ever have no IDs to send, but not be the leader?

The correctness properties the designer wants to check using SPIN are:

- Are deadlocks possible?
- Once a process is elected, are no other processes elected at any future time?
- Once a process is elected, is it elected at all future times?

The integrated environment should provide a standard syntax for protocol designers that can be used to write down both the definition of a protocol and formulas describing its properties. Any protocol definition can be translated to both an equivalent Alloy syntax, and an equivalent SPIN syntax. Any formula specified by the designer can be converted to Alloy syntax, SPIN syntax, or both, depending on whether its structure fits each system. The above protocol, written in a syntax accommodated by the environment, is presented in Figure 2.

The two `Links` denote buffered message channels of size 1, which define the behavior of the `->` operator when it is used between a process' predecessor and itself or itself and its successor, respectively. If a `Link` is not explicitly defined, `->` defaults to synchronous message passing.

The `act` keyword denotes labeled, guarded actions that a protocol may take. The `final` action, for example, may be taken only if `leader` is true. Note that there is no particular

```

class Process:
  id: Pid
  predecessor: Process
  Link(predecessor, self, 1)
  successor: Process
  Link(self, successor, 1)
  pool: set Pid
  leader: Bool

  init: id -> successor

  act send(not leader):
    some Pid in pool -> successor

  act receive(predecessor -> rec_id):
    if (rec_id < id):
    elif (rec_id = id): leader = True
    elif (rec_id > id): pool.add(rec_id)

  act final(leader): accept

  invariant Ring:
    all p in Process:
      all q in Process in p.successor*

  invariant PredSucc:
    all p,q in Process:
      q = p.successor implies p=q.predecessor

```

Figure 2: Leadership election in a unidirectional ring

semantics associated with the case that multiple guards are true simultaneously. Different formal tools handle this case in different ways, or may not even have a concept of concurrency.

The **invariant** keyword introduces required structure over the successor and predecessor pointers of a process. **Ring** enforces the topological constraint of the protocol (a unidirectional ring), and should be read as “for all processes p , any process q is in the transitive closure (e.g., reachable via a finite chaining) of its successor pointer”. **PredSucc** enforces the requirement that predecessor is the inverse of successor, and should be read as “If q is the successor of p , then p is the predecessor of q ”.

It is important to note that the above protocol model may not be fully expressible in all formal tools. Alloy, for example, has no concept of buffered channels, and would model message passing as changes to relations between identifiers and atoms in the **Process** set. In this case, any translation performed by the environment would be accompanied by an explicit message informing the user of the loss in detail.

The properties that the designer is interested in checking are expressed in a similar manner to invariants, as presented in Figure 3. Note that the syntax used in expressing these properties (largely first-order logic with some temporal operators) is to be translated, if possible, into the formal logic(s) supported by the component systems integrated within the environment. Finally,

```

# At all times, is at most one process eventually elected as
leader? all p,q in Process: p.leader implies no q.leader

# At all times, is at least one process eventually elected as leader?
all p in Process: always eventually some p.leader

# Is the process with the highest identifier always elected leader?
all p,q in Process: p.leader implies no q: q.id > p.id

# Can a process ever have no IDs to send, but not be the leader?
some p in Process: p.pool={} and not p.leader

# Once a process is elected, is it elected at all future times?
all p in Process: p.leader implies always p.leader

# Once a process is elected, are no other processes elected
# at any future time?
all p,q in Process: p.leader implies never q.leader

#Are deadlocks possible?
some p in Process: always blocked

```

Figure 3: Protocol properties to be checked

the deadlock property makes use of the `blocked` keyword. This denotes a state in which the process is either unable to act (i.e., no action guard is true) or is waiting on a blocking operation (e.g., sending a message on a link with a full buffer). Our infrastructure will translate as many of the above properties as possible to both Alloy and SPIN. Once verification is complete, the model checkers' results can be presented as counterexamples or verified statements to the user.

3 Infrastructure for Instantiating Accessible Integrated Environments

We propose an infrastructure for implementing, instantiating, and delivering an accessible integrated formal reasoning environment. This infrastructure is comprised of a collection of components that support the tasks that must be performed by three possible user roles (actual users may have more than one role): (1) formal systems experts who implement automated formal verification and analysis algorithms, as well as translators for underlying formal tools; (2) application domain expert administrators who instantiate libraries, decide which components and libraries are available to end-users in the environment at any given time, and authors content that may put into context the tasks in which the end-user may engage (e.g., homework assignments, tutorials, documentation, and so on); and (3) end-users who use the environment to engage in formal reasoning tasks. The overall organization is presented in Figure 4.

Formal Systems Experts and Component Implementation. It is the responsibility of formal systems experts to provide implementations of common formal analysis and verification

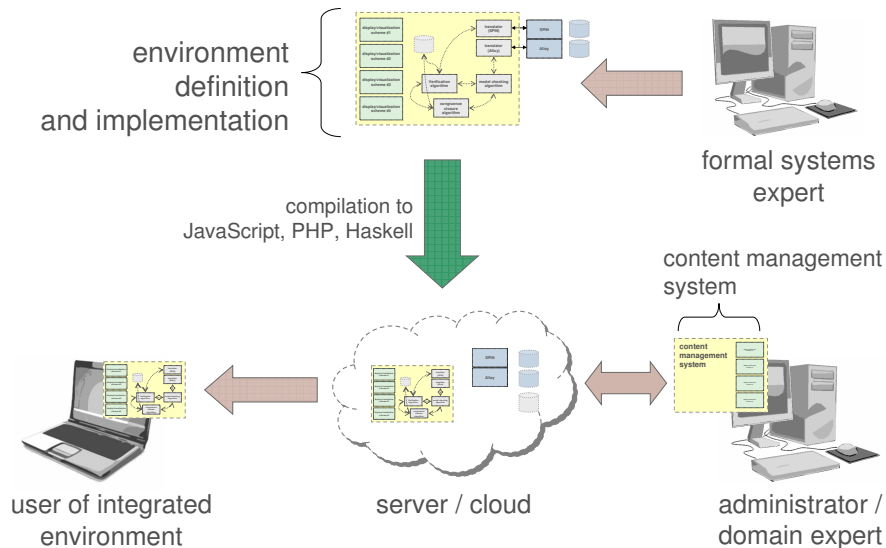


Figure 4: Overall organization of infrastructure.

algorithms (e.g., monomorphic type checking, congruence closure computation, resolution, unification, and so on), as well as appropriate translations for external systems or components (e.g., translations of a particular syntax for protocols and protocol properties to an appropriate Alloy or SPIN syntax). In order to support formal systems experts in this task, it is necessary to provide a language that: (1) allows them to easily define a standard definition for expressions (formulas and terms) for a particular environment (parsers are generated automatically); (2) allows them to specify algorithms that operate on these formulas; and (3) allows them to define algorithms that are interdependent and can invoke one another.

All component algorithms and translations must be transformations that are defined on a subset of the expression space supported by the environment. Any or all of the algorithms can then be applied to all subexpressions of any expression tree parsed from the formal argument provided by the user as input. Each subexpression can then be annotated with the results of applying various components to that subexpression, as illustrated in Figure 6. Environment implementers can then combine various interface features to display this information to users in different ways (including formats that are accompanied by widgets that allow users to explore or filter the results).

Because the definition of any component algorithm is allowed to invoke any other algorithm, it is possible to construct a dependency graph between component algorithms, such as the one illustrated in Figure 5. If the dependency graph is a DAG, it is possible to provide an ordering for algorithms that ensures convergence. Otherwise, it is necessary to either allow the algorithms to iterate until convergence or specify a bound on the number of iterations.

Application Domain Experts and Instantiation. It is the job of the application domain expert administrator to instantiate a library of formal facts that will be seen and can be used by the end-user in constructing formal arguments, and to provide other content or documentation that may incorporate examples of formal arguments. Off-the-shelf open source *content management systems* (CMS) such as Drupal and MediaWiki can be extended to support these

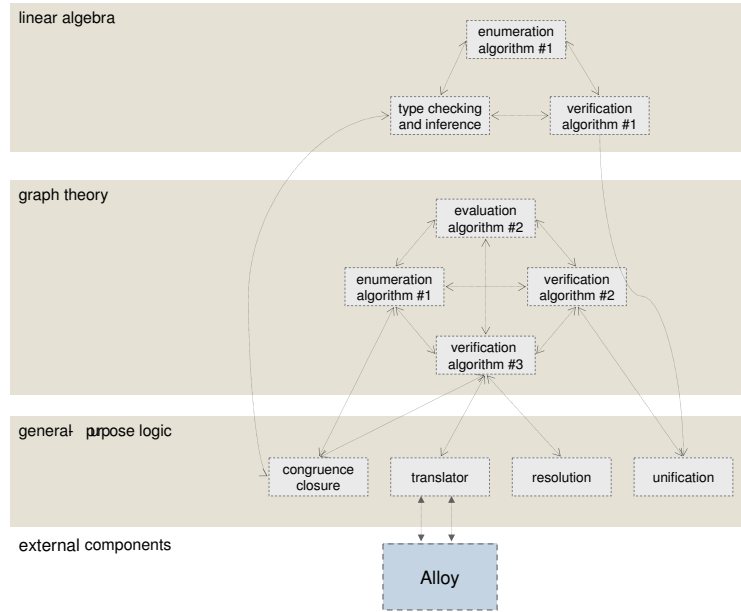


Figure 5: Example of a component algorithm dependency graph.

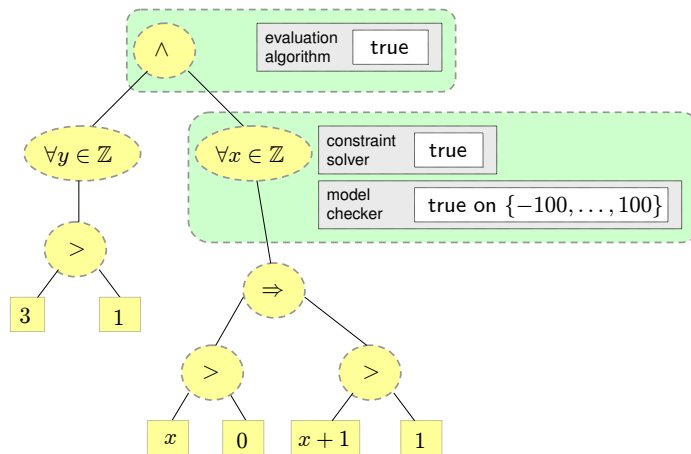


Figure 6: Abstract syntax tree for “ $(\forall y \in \mathbb{Z}, 3 > 1) \wedge (\forall x \in \mathbb{Z}, (x > 0 \Rightarrow x + 1 > 1))$ ” with multiple values (produced by different components) for some subexpressions.

tasks. The current state of these features has been addressed in our earlier work [20, 19].

End-users and a Web-based Interactive Environment. End-users can use any standard browser capable of running JavaScript applications to run the integrated environment. From the end-user’s perspective, the environment provides a way to input automatically verifiable

formal arguments using a conventional syntax similar to that of \LaTeX . Within a particular environment instantiation, the functionality provided by the integrated components is exposed using a variety of JavaScript visualization widgets that include:

- friendly, formatted output of the formal argument, including highlighting of syntactic and logical errors, or other properties derived through automated analysis;
- lists of formal expressions, including the propositions available in the library, facts derived by one or more component algorithms, and translations of the input into syntaxes for particular underlying systems and tools;
- interactive controls for starting and stopping inference, evaluation, enumeration, and verification components that have been implemented to allow partial results.

4 Related and Future Work

This work incorporates ideas and techniques from multiple disciplines and areas of research. We review related work that shares one of two relevant features with this work: usability and accessibility of automated and semi-automated formal reasoning tools and techniques, and use of multiple automated and semi-automated formal reasoning tools and techniques in conjunction with another to accomplish formal reasoning tasks in a specific application domain.

Practical Usability and Accessibility of Automated Formal Systems. This work aims to address the disincentives to utilizing automated formal reasoning assistance systems by integrating multiple systems within an accessible environment. We share motivation with, are inspired by, and incorporate ideas from related efforts to address practical usability in the formal systems communities. Some aim to provide interfaces that have a familiar syntax [2, 17, 27, 24]; some aim to make optional the need to provide explicit references to the formal facts being used within the individual steps of a formal argument [1, 5, 25]; some aim to eliminate steep learning curves [3, 14, 6]; some aim to reduce the logistical difficulties of utilizing automated formal reasoning assistance systems [16, 14]. We are inspired by search mechanisms for libraries of formal facts [7, 4, 9] and programming language constructs [22], as well as keyword-based lookup mechanisms for programming environments [10, 21]. Providing the functionality of a formal reasoning environment within a browser is a goal that has been adopted by some projects [16], though that work focuses on delivering the look and functionality of an existing proof assistant.

Use of Multiple Automated Formal Systems in Conjunction. This work seeks to provide an infrastructure for integrating and automating multiple formal tools. We draw on previous work in the model checking community, from which there has been substantial interest in automating the translation of a model to multiple formal systems. PRISM [18] draws on numeric methods for linear system solving, as well as both symbolic and explicit state model checking libraries, to check properties of probabilistic systems. The Symbolic Analysis Laboratory (SAL) [23] is a suite of formal methods for checking properties of concurrent systems, including multiple model checkers, a type checker, and several simulation tools. The AVANTSSAR project [26] is a platform for protocol security analysis, incorporating constraint solving, symbolic model checking, refinement libraries, and automated interaction with the Isabelle theorem prover.

Cryptol [8] is a domain-specific language and tool suite that provides automated verification capabilities for cryptographic algorithms. In Cryptol, verification can be performed in a fully-automated manner, in which modern off-the-shelf SAT and SMT solvers are used to perform

the verification, or in a semi-automated manner, in which the Cryptol-written theorems are translated into Isabelle/HOL to be manually constructed by the user. The Cryptol tool suite allows system designers to experiment their programs as their designs evolve, and provides them with the capability of generating C, C++, Haskell software implementations, or VHDL and Verilog HDL hardware implementations.

Our work is distinguished from the above by a stronger emphasis on accessibility for non-expert end-users, on delivery of functionality over the web, and on providing feedback for high-level partial formal arguments. We also explicitly address the task of implementing, extending, and instantiating integrated environments of both basic algorithms and systems.

Future Work. This work raises many new questions about how accessibility and integration can play complementary roles in delivering the benefits of automated formal reasoning assistance tools and techniques to end-users working in particular application domains. Further work is required to determine whether the supporting languages and tools are sufficiently flexible and expressive for integrating a wide variety of existing algorithms and automated systems.

As an example of one specific direction for future work, many other workflows and practical tasks could be better supported by building extensions and plugins for *content management systems* (CMSs). For example, a CMS may be extended with facilities that allow end-users to test and refine formal arguments collaboratively, and to collaboratively populate a database of domain-specific formal facts.

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