

# EXPOSITOR: Scriptable Time-Travel Debugging with First Class Traces

Khoo Yit Phang, Jeffrey S. Foster, and Michael Hicks  
Computer Science Department, University of Maryland, College Park  
Email: {khooy, jfoster, mwh}@cs.umd.edu

**Abstract**—We present EXPOSITOR, a new debugging environment that combines scripting and time-travel debugging to allow developers to automate complex debugging tasks. The fundamental abstraction provided by EXPOSITOR is the execution *trace*, which is a time-indexed sequence of program state snapshots. Developers can manipulate traces as if they were simple lists with operations such as `map` and `filter`. Under the hood, EXPOSITOR efficiently implements traces as lazy, sparse interval trees, whose contents are materialized on demand. EXPOSITOR also provides a novel data structure, the *edit hash array mapped trie*, which is a lazy implementation of sets, maps, multisets, and multimaps that enables developers to maximize the efficiency of their debugging scripts. We have used EXPOSITOR to debug a stack overflow and to unravel a subtle data race in Firefox. We believe that EXPOSITOR represents an important step forward in improving the technology for diagnosing complex, hard-to-understand bugs.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“...we talk a lot about finding bugs, but really, [Firefox’s] bottleneck is not finding bugs but fixing [them]...”

—Robert O’Callahan<sup>1</sup>

“[In debugging,] understanding how the failure came to be...requires by far the most time and other resources”

—Andreas Zeller [1]

Debugging program failures is an inescapable task for software developers. Understanding a failure involves repeated application of the scientific method: the programmer makes some observations; proposes a hypothesis as to the cause of the failure; uses this hypothesis to make predictions about the program’s behavior; tests those predictions using experiments; and finally either declares victory or repeats the process with a new or refined hypothesis.

*Scriptable debugging* is a powerful technique for hypothesis testing in which programmers write scripts to perform complex debugging tasks. For example, suppose we observe a bug involving a cleverly implemented set data structure. We can try to debug the problem by writing a script that maintains a *shadow data structure* that implements the set more simply (e.g., as a list). We run the buggy program, and the script tracks the program’s calls to `insert` and `remove`, stopping execution when the contents of the shadow data structure fail to match those of the buggy one, helping pinpoint the underlying fault.

While we could have employed the same debugging strategy by altering the program itself (e.g., by inserting print statements and assertions), doing so would require recompilation—and that can take considerable time for large programs (e.g., Firefox), thus greatly slowing the rate of hypothesis testing. Modifying a program can also change its behavior—we have all experienced the frustration of inserting a debugging print statement only to make the problem disappear! Scripts also have the benefit that they can invoke to libraries not used by the program itself, and may be reused in other contexts.

**Background: Prior scriptable debuggers.** There has been considerable prior work on scriptable debugging. GDB’s Python interface makes GDB’s interactive commands—stepping, setting breakpoints, etc.—available in a general-purpose programming language. However, this interface employs a callback-oriented programming style which, as pointed out by Marceau et al. [2], reduces composability and reusability, and complicates checking temporal properties. Marceau et al. propose treating the program as an event generator—each function call, memory reference, etc. can be thought of as an event—and scripts are written in the style of *functional reactive programming* (FRP) [3]. While FRP-style debugging solves the problems of callback-based programming, it has a key limitation: time always marches forward, so we cannot ask questions about prior states. For example, if while debugging a program we find a doubly-freed address, we cannot jump backward in time to find the corresponding `malloc`. Instead we would need to rerun the program from scratch to find that call, which may be problematic if there is any nondeterminism, e.g., if the addresses returned by `malloc` differ from run to run. We could instead prospectively gather the addresses returned by `malloc` as the program runs, but then we would need to record *all* such calls up to the erroneous `free`.

Time-travel debuggers, like UndoDB [4], and systems for capturing entire program executions, like Amber [5], allow a single nondeterministic execution to be examined at multiple points in time. Unfortunately, *scriptable* time-travel debuggers typically use callback-style programming, with all its problems. (Sec. VI discusses prior work in detail.)

**EXPOSITOR: Scriptable, time-travel debugging.** In this paper, we present EXPOSITOR, a new scriptable debugging system inspired by FRP-style scripting but with the advantages of time-travel debugging. EXPOSITOR scripts treat a program’s execution *trace* as a (potentially infinite) list of time-annotated program state snapshots. Scripts can manipulate traces using

<sup>1</sup><http://vimeo.com/groups/lfx/videos/12471856>, at 27:15

common list operations: traces can be filtered, mapped, sliced, indexed, and merged to create lightweight projections of the entire program execution. Thus, EXPOSITOR makes it easy to check properties that span an execution, and to write new scripts that combine results computed by prior scripts on the same execution. EXPOSITOR scripts run on top of UndoDB [4], a GDB extension supporting time travel, and are written in Python, extending GDB’s Python environment. As such, EXPOSITOR users can seamlessly switch between running scripts and interacting directly with an execution via GDB. (Sec. II overviews EXPOSITOR’s scripting interface.)

The key idea for making EXPOSITOR efficient is to employ *laziness* in its implementation of traces—invoking the time-travel debugger is expensive, and laziness helps minimize the number of calls to it. EXPOSITOR represents traces as sparse, time-indexed interval trees and fills in their contents on demand. For example, suppose we use the breakpoints combinator to create a trace *tr* containing just the program execution’s malloc calls. If we ask for the first element of *tr* before time 42 (perhaps because there is a suspicious program output then), EXPOSITOR will direct the time-travel debugger to time 42 and run it *backward* until hitting the call, capturing the resulting state in the trace data structure—the remainder of the trace, after time 42 and before the malloc call, is not computed. (Sec. III discusses the implementation of traces.)

In addition to traces, EXPOSITOR scripts typically employ various internal data structures to record information, e.g., the set *s* of arguments to malloc calls, or a map from variable addresses to the time of their last write. These data structures must also be lazy so as not to compromise trace laziness—if we eagerly computed the set *s* just mentioned to satisfy a membership query at time *t*, we would have to run the time-travel debugger from the start up until *t*, considering all malloc calls, even if only the most recent call is sufficient to satisfy the query. Thus, EXPOSITOR provides script writers with a novel data structure: the *edit hash array mapped trie* (*EditHAMT*), which provides lazy construction and queries for sets, maps, multisets, and multimaps. As far as we are aware, the EditHAMT is the first data structure to provide these capabilities. (Sec. IV describes the EditHAMT.)

We have used EXPOSITOR to write a number of simple scripts, as well as to debug two more significant problems. Sec. II describes how we used EXPOSITOR to find an exploitable buffer overflow. Sec. V explains how we used EXPOSITOR to track down a deep, subtle bug in Firefox that was never directly fixed, though it was papered over with a subsequent bug fix (the fix resolved the symptom, but did not remove the underlying fault). In the process, we developed several reusable analyses, including a simple race detector. (Sec. V presents our full case study.)

In summary, we believe that EXPOSITOR represents an important step forward in improving the technology for diagnosing complex, hard-to-understand bugs.

```

1 class execution:
2   get_at(t):      snapshot at time t
3   breakpoints(fn): snapshot trace of breakpoints at func fn
4   syscalls(fn):  snapshot trace of breakpoints at syscall fn
5   watchpoints(x, rw):
6     snapshot trace of read/write watchpoints at var x
7   all_calls():   snapshot trace of all function entries
8   all_returns(): snapshot trace of all function exits
9
10  cont():        manually continue the execution
11  get_time():    latest time of the execution
12
13 class trace:
14  __len__():     called by “len(trace)”
15  __iter__():    called by “for item in trace”
16  get_at(t):     item at exactly time t
17  get_after(t):  next item after time t
18  get_before(t): previous item before time t
19
20  filter(p):     subtrace of items for which p returns true
21  map(f):        new trace with f applied to all items
22  slice(t0, t1): subtrace from time t0 to time t1
23
24  merge(f, tr):   see Fig. 2a
25  trailing_merge(f, tr): see Fig. 2b
26  rev_trailing_merge(f, tr): see Fig. 2c
27  scan(f, acc):   see Fig. 2d
28  rev_scan(f, acc): see Fig. 2e
29
30 class snapshot:
31  read_var(x):    value of variable x in current stack frame
32  read_retaddrs(): return addresses on the stack
33  ... and other methods to access program state ...
34
35 class item:
36  time:          item’s execution time
37  value:         item’s contents

```

Fig. 1. EXPOSITOR’s Python-based scripting API (partial). The `get_X` and `__len__` methods of `execution` and `trace` are eager, and the remaining methods of those classes return lazy values.

## II. THE DESIGN OF EXPOSITOR

We begin our presentation by describing EXPOSITOR from the perspective of the debugging script writer. Fig. 1 lists the key classes and methods of EXPOSITOR’s scripting interface, which is a library written on top of GDB’s Python environment, run under UndoDB. There are four classes shown (we have omitted several of these classes’ methods due to lack of space). The class `execution`, of which there is a singleton instance `the_execution`, represents the entire execution of the program being debugged. The `trace` class represents projections of the execution at points of interest, and items in traces are indexed by their time in the execution. The `snapshot` class represents a program state at a particular point and provides methods for accessing that state, e.g., reading variables, reading the return addresses on the stack, and so on. There are several methods of `execution` that produce traces of snapshots. Finally, the `item` class represents arbitrary values that are associated with a particular point in the execution.

Given a debugging hypothesis, we use the EXPOSITOR

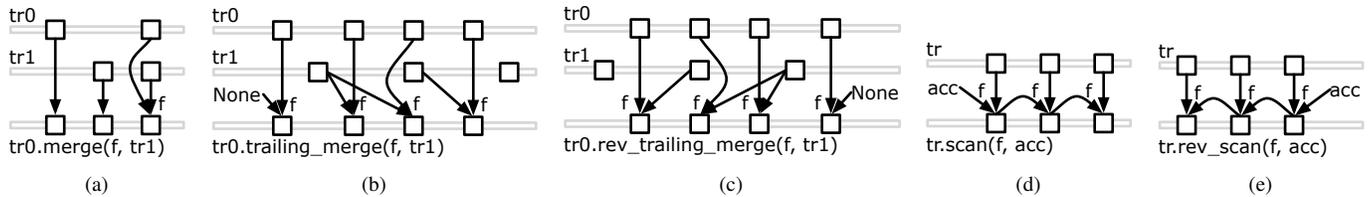


Fig. 2. Illustration of complex trace operations.

interface to apply the following recipe. First, we derive one or more traces from the execution that contain events relevant to the hypothesis; such events could be function calls, breakpoints, system calls, etc.. Next, we combine these traces as appropriate, applying filters, maps, and so on according to relationships we expect to see if our hypothesis holds. Finally, we query the traces to find the result we are looking for.

#### A. Example: Reverse engineering a stack-smashing attack

We illustrate the use of EXPOSITOR with a concrete example: reverse engineering a stack-smashing attack, in which malware overflows a stack buffer in the target program to overwrite a return address, thereby gaining control of the program counter [6].

We develop a reusable script that can find the exact time a stack has been smashed, which will help us pinpoint the attack vector. Our script maintains a *shadow stack* of return addresses and uses it to check that calls and returns only modify the topmost return address on the stack; any violation of this property indicates the stack has been smashed.

We begin by using the `all_calls` and `all_returns` methods on the `_execution` to create traces of just the snapshots at function calls and returns, respectively:

```
38 calls = the_execution.all_calls()
39 rets = the_execution.all_returns()
```

Next, we combine these into a single trace so that we can compare consecutive calls or returns. To do so, we can use the `tr0.merge(f, tr1)` method, which creates a new trace containing the events from `tr0` and `tr1`; any items from `tr0` and `tr1` that occur at the same time are combined with function `f` (Fig. 2a). Since function calls and returns can never coincide, we can pass `None` for `f` (as it will not be called):

```
40 calls_rets = calls.merge(None, rets)
```

Now, we map the `snapshot.read_retaddrs` method, which produces the list of return addresses on the call stack, over the trace to create the shadow stack at every call and return:

```
41 shadow_stacks = calls_rets.map(
42     lambda s: map(int, s.read_retaddrs()))
```

We also use `map` to cast the return addresses to Python ints.

Now we need to check that function calls and returns only add or remove one address at the top of the stack. We make this precise with the following function:

```
43 def find_corrupted(snap, opt_shadow):
44     if opt_shadow.force() is not None:
45         for x, y in zip(snap.read_retaddrs(), opt_shadow.force()):
46             if int(x) != y:
47                 return x # l-value of return address on stack
48     return None
```

Here `find_corrupted` takes as arguments a snapshot `snap` and its immediately preceding shadow stack in `opt_shadow`; the `opt_` prefix indicates that there may not be prior shadow stack (if `snap` is the first execution point), and we need to call the `force` method on `opt_shadow` to retrieve its value (we will explain the significance of this in Sec. III). If there is a prior shadow stack, we compare every return address in `snap` against the shadow stack and return the first location that differs, or `None` if there are no corrupted addresses. (The Python `zip` function merges two lists to make a list of pairs.)

We apply `find_corrupted` with the `tr0.trailing_merge(f, tr1)` method, which creates a new trace by calling `f` to merge each item from `tr0` with the immediately preceding item from `tr1`, or `None` if there is no preceding item (Fig. 2b).

Finally, we use the `trailing_merge` method to combine `calls_rets` and `shadow_stacks` with `find_corrupted` to generate a trace of corrupted memory locations, filtering out `None` values:

```
49 corrupted_addrs = calls_rets \
50     .trailing_merge(find_corrupted, shadow_stacks) \
51     .filter(lambda x: x is not None)
```

The resulting trace contains exactly the locations of corrupted return addresses.

#### B. Mini case study: Running EXPOSITOR on tinyhttpd

We used the script just developed on a version of `tinyhttpd`<sup>2</sup> that we previously modified to include a buffer overflow bug, as an exercise for a security class in which students develop exploits of the vulnerability.

As malware, we deployed an exploit that uses a return-to-libc attack [7] against `tinyhttpd`. The attack causes `tinyhttpd` to print “Now I pwn your computer” to the terminal and then resume normal operation. Finding buffer overflows using standard techniques can be challenging, since there can be a delay from the exploit overflowing the buffer to the payload taking effect, during which the exploited call stack may be erased by normal program execution, and the payload may also erase traces of itself from the stack before producing a symptom.

<sup>2</sup><http://tinyhttpd.sourceforge.net/>

To use EXPOSITOR, we call the expositor launcher with tinyhttpd as argument, which will start a GDB session with EXPOSITOR’s library loaded, and enter the Python interactive prompt from GDB:<sup>3</sup>

```
52 % expositor tinyhttpd
53 (expositor) python-interactive
```

Then, we start running tinyhttpd:

```
54 >>> the_execution.cont() # start running
55 httpd running on port 47055
```

When tinyhttpd launches, it prints out the port number on which it accepts client connections. Then, on a different terminal, we run the exploit with this port number:

```
56 % ./exploit.py 47055
57 Trying port 47055
58 pwning...
```

At this point, tinyhttpd prints the exploit message, so we interrupt the debugger and use EXPOSITOR to find the stack corruption, starting from the time when we interrupted it:

```
59 Now I pwn your computer
60 ^C
61 Program received signal SIGINT, Interrupt
62 >>> corrupted_addrs = stack_corruption()
63 # function containing Sec. II-A code
64 >>> time = the_execution.get_time()
65 >>> last_corrupt = corrupted_addrs.get_before(time)
```

Items in a trace are indexed by time, so the `get_before` method call above tells EXPOSITOR to start computing `corrupted_addrs` from the interrupted time backwards, and find the first function call or return when the stack corruption is detected. We can print the results:

```
66 >>> print time
67 56686.8
68 >>> print last_corrupt
69 Item(56449.222, address)
```

This shows that the interrupt occurred at time 56686.8, and the corrupted stack was first detected at a function call or return at time 56449.222. We can then find and print the snapshot that corrupted return address with:

```
70 >>> bad_writes = the_execution \
71     .watchpoints(last_corrupt.value, rw=WRITE)
72 >>> last_bad_write = bad_writes.get_before(last_corrupt.time)
73 >>> print last_bad_write
74 Item(56436.000, snapshot)
```

We find that the first write that corrupted the return address occurred at time 56436.000. From this point, we can retrieve the snapshot via `last_bad_write.value` and inspect it. In this case, the very first snapshot gives us a backtrace that identifies the exact line of code in tinyhttpd, a socket `recv` with an out-of-bounds pointer, that is causing the stack corruption. Notice that to find the bug, EXPOSITOR only needed to inspect from time 56686.8 to time 56436.000. If the first snapshot had not

shown the vulnerability, then we would have incrementally searched for the next stack corruption event until we tracked down the bug, inspecting only as much of the execution as necessary. Notice also that this script is reusable—we could use it to find stack corruption in any program.

This mini case study also demonstrates that, for some debugging tasks, it can be much faster to search backward in time. It takes only 1 second for `corrupted_addrs.get_before(time)` to return; whereas if we had instead searched forward from the beginning (e.g., simulating a debugger without time-travel):

```
75 first_corrupted = corrupted_addrs.get_after(0)
```

it takes 4 seconds for the answer to be computed. Using EXPOSITOR, users can write scripts that search forward or backward in time, as optimal for the task.

### C. Additional API methods

The example so far has covered much of the API in Fig. 1. Most of the remaining methods are straightforward. In addition to the methods discussed before, the execution class includes a method `get_at(t)` to return a snapshot at a particular time, and methods `syscalls` and `watchpoints` to return traces at system call entries and when memory values are read or written.

The trace class contains several simple methods for working with traces, such as `__len__` for computing the length of a trace. In addition to `map` and `filter`, the trace class also includes `slice`, which returns a subtrace between two times, which lets us avoid computation over uninteresting portions of a trace.

The trace class also contains several more complex operations on traces. We have already seen `merge` and `trailing_merge`. The `rev_trailing_merge` method is the same as the latter, except it merges with future items rather than past items (Fig. 2c). The `scan` method performs a fold- or reduce-like operation for every prefix of of an input trace (Fig. 2d). It is called as `tr.scan(acc, op)`, where `op` is a binary function that takes an accumulator and an item as arguments, and `acc` is the initial accumulator. It returns a new trace containing the same number of items at the same times as in the input trace `tr`, where the  $n$ th output item  $out_n$  is recursively computed as:

$$out_n = \begin{cases} in_n \circledast op out_{n-1} & \text{if } n > 0 \\ in_0 \circledast op acc & \text{if } n = 0 \end{cases}$$

The `rev_tscan` method is similar, but deriving a trace based on future items rather than past items (Fig. 2e). `rev_scan` computes the output item  $out_n$  as follows:

$$out_n = \begin{cases} in_n \circledast op out_{n+1} & \text{if } n > 0 \\ in_{length-1} \circledast op acc & \text{if } n = length - 1 \end{cases}$$

We will see sample uses of these methods in section IV.

## III. LAZY TRACES IN EXPOSITOR

As just discussed, EXPOSITOR allows users to treat traces as if they were lists of snapshots. However, to scale to lengthy executions on large systems it would be impractical to eagerly

<sup>3</sup>GDB contains an existing `python` command that is not interactive; `python-interactive` is a new command that we are currently submitting to GDB.

record and analyze full program snapshots at every program point. Instead, EXPOSITOR uses the underlying time-travel debugger, UndoDB, to construct snapshots on demand, and to discard them when they are no longer used (since it may be expensive to actually keep too many snapshots in memory at once). Thus the major challenge is to minimize the demand for snapshots, which EXPOSITOR accomplishes by constructing and manipulating traces *lazily*.

More precisely, all of the trace generators and combinators, including `execution.all_calls`, `trace.map`, `trace.merge`, etc., return immediately without invoking the time-travel debugger. It is only when final values are demanded, with `execution.get_at`, `trace.get_at`, `trace.get_after`, or `trace.get_before`, that EXPOSITOR queries the actual program execution, and it does so only as much as is needed to acquire the result. For example, the construction of `corrupted_addrs` in Sec. II-A induces *no* time travel on the underlying program—it is not until the call to `corrupted_addrs.get_before(time)` in Sec. II-B that EXPOSITOR uses the debugger to acquire the final result.

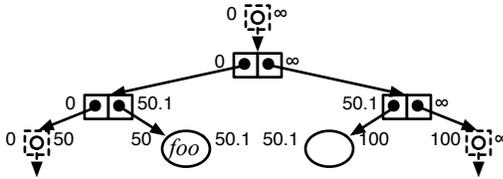
To achieve this design, EXPOSITOR uses a lazy, interval-tree-like data structure to implement traces. More precisely, a trace is a binary tree whose nodes are annotated with the (closed) lower-bound and (open) upper-bound of the intervals they span, and leaf nodes either contain a value or are empty. The initial tree for a trace contains no elements (only its definition), and EXPOSITOR materializes tree nodes as needed.

As a concrete example, the following trace constructs the tree shown on the right, with a single lazy root node spanning the interval  $[0, \infty)$ , which we draw as a dotted box and arrow.

```
76 foo = the_execution.breakpoints("foo")
```



Now suppose we call `foo.get_before(100)`. EXPOSITOR sees that the query is looking for the last call to `foo` before time 100, so it will ask the time-travel debugger to jump to time 100 and then run backward until hitting such a call. Let us suppose the call is at time 50, and the next instruction after that call is at time 50.1. Then EXPOSITOR will expand the root node shown above to the following tree:



Here the trace has been subdivided into four intervals: The intervals  $[0, 50)$  and  $[100, \infty)$  are lazy nodes with no further information, as EXPOSITOR did not look at those portions of the execution. The interval  $[50, 50.1)$  contains the discovered call, and the interval  $[50.1, 100)$  is fully resolved and contains no calls to `foo`. Notice that if we ask the same query again, EXPOSITOR can traverse the interval tree above to respond without needing to query the time-travel debugger.

Analogously to the example above, a call to `get_after(t)` is either answered immediately (if the result has already been

computed) or causes the time-travel debugger to jump to time  $t$  and execute forward. Similarly, a call to `get_at(t)` either returns immediately or causes the time-travel debugger to jump to time  $t$  (which may yield **None** if the value being sought, e.g., a call to `foo`, did not occur at the given time).

### A. Lazy trace operations

We implement `filter`, `map`, and `slice` lazily on top of the interval tree data structure. For a call `tr1 = tr0.map(f)`, we initially construct an empty interval tree, and when values are demanded in `tr1` (by `get_X` calls), EXPOSITOR conceptually calls `tr0.get_X`, applies `f` to the result, and caches the result for future reuse. Calls to `tr0.filter(p)` are handled similarly, constructing a lazy tree that, when demanded, repeatedly gets values from `tr0` until `p` is satisfied. Note that for efficiency, EXPOSITOR’s implementation actually does not directly call `get_X` on the underlying traces, but instead manipulates their tree data structures directly.

The implementation of `tr0.merge(f, tr1)` also calls `get_X` on `tr1` also as required. For a call `tr.slice(t0, t1)` EXPOSITOR creates an interval tree that delegates `get_X` calls asking for items from time `t0` to time `t1` to `tr`, and returns **None** for items that fall outside that interval.

For the last four operations, `[rev_]trailing_merge` and `[rev_]scan`, EXPOSITOR employs additional laziness in the helper function argument `f`. To illustrate, consider a call to `tr.scan(f, acc)`. Here, EXPOSITOR passes the accumulator to `f` wrapped in an instance of class `lazy`, defined as follows:

```
77 class lazy:
78     force():      return the actual value
79     is_forced():  return whether force has been called
```

Here the `force` method, when first called, will compute the actual value and cache it; the cached value is returned in subsequent calls. Thus, helper `f` can force the accumulator as needed, and if it is not forced, it will not be computed.

To see the benefit, consider the following example, which uses `scan` to derive a new trace in which each item is a count of the number of consecutive calls to `foo` with non-zero arguments, resetting the count when `foo` is called with zero:

```
80 foo = execution.breakpoints("foo") # void foo(int x)
81 def count_nonzero_foo(lazy_acc, snapshot):
82     if snapshot.read_var("x") > 0:
83         return lazy_acc.force() + 1
84     else:
85         return 0
86 nonzero_foo = foo.scan(0, count_nonzero_foo)
```

Notice that if `lazy_acc` were not lazy, EXPOSITOR would have to compute its value before calling `count_nonzero_foo`. By the definition of `scan` (Fig. 2d), this means that it must recursively call `count_nonzero_foo` to compute all prior output items before computing the current item, even if it is unnecessary to do so, e.g., if we had called `nonzero_foo.get_before(t)`, and the call to `foo` just before time  $t$  had argument `x=0`. Thus, a lazy accumulator avoids this unnecessary work. EXPOSITOR uses a lazy accumulator in `rev_scan` for the same reason.

Likewise, observe that in `tr0.trailing_merge(f,tr1)`, for a particular item in `tr0` the function `f` may not need to look in `tr1` to determine its result; thus, EXPOSITOR wraps the `tr1` argument to `f` in an instance of class `lazy`. The implementation of `rev_trailing_merge` similarly passes lazy items from `tr1` to `f`. Note that there is no such laziness in the regular merge operation. The reason is that in `tr0.merge(f,tr1)`, the items from `tr0` and `tr1` that are combined with `f` occur at the same time. Thus, making `f`'s arguments lazy would not reduce demands on the underlying time-travel debugger.

### B. Tree scan

Finally, EXPOSITOR provides another list combinator, *tree-scan*, which is a lazier variant of `scan` that is sometimes more efficient. Tree scan is invoked with `tr.tscan(op)`, where `op` must be an associative function that is lazy and optional in its left argument and lazy in its right argument. The `tscan` method generates an output trace of the same length as the input trace, where the  $n$ th output  $out_n$  is defined as

$$out_n = in_0 \circledast in_1 \circledast \cdots \circledast in_n$$

Notice that there is no accumulator, and EXPOSITOR can apply `op` in any order, since it is associative. When a value at time  $t$  is demanded from the output trace, EXPOSITOR first demands the item  $in_n$  at that time in the input trace (if no such item exists, then there is no item at that time in the output trace). Then EXPOSITOR walks down the interval tree structure of the input trace, calling `op` (only if demanded) on each internal tree node's children to compute  $out_n$ . Since the interval tree for the input trace is computed lazily, `op` may sometimes be called with **None** as a left argument, for the case when `op` forces an interval that turns out to contain no values; thus for correctness, we also require that `op` treats **None** as a left identity. (For technical reasons, `tscan` will never pass **None** at the right argument to `op`.)

Because both arguments of `op` are lazy, EXPOSITOR avoids computing either argument when unnecessary. The `is_forced` method of the `lazy` type is particularly useful for `tscan`, as it allows us to determine if either argument has been forced and evaluate it first. For example, we can find if a trace contains a true value as follows:

```

87 def has_true(lazyleft, lazyright):
88     return lazyleft.is_forced() and lazyleft.force() \
89         or lazyright.is_forced() and lazyright.force() \
90         or lazyleft.force() or lazyright.force()
91 has_true_trace = some_trace.tscan(has_true)
92 last_has_true = has_true_trace.get_before("inf")

```

The best case for this example occurs if either `lazyleft` or `lazyright` have been forced by a prior query, in which case, either the first clause (line 88) or second clause (line 89) will be true and the unforced argument does not need to be computed due to short-circuiting.

EXPOSITOR's `rev_tscan` derives a new trace based on future items instead of past items, computing output item  $out_n$  as:

$$out_n = in_n \circledast in_{n+1} \circledast \cdots \circledast in_{length-1}$$

```

98 class edithamt:
99     find(k):         Return the value for k or None if not found
100    find_multi(k):   Return an iterator of all values bound to k
101
102    # The following are class methods
103    addkeyvalue(lazy_eh, k, v):
104        Add binding of k to v to lazy_eh
105
106    remove(lazy_eh, k):
107        Remove all bindings for k from lazy_eh
108
109    concat(lazy_eh1, lazy_eh2):
110        Concatenate lazy_eh2 edit history to lazy_eh1

```

Fig. 3. The EditHAMT API (partial).

In this case, the right argument to `op` is optional, rather than the left argument.

## IV. THE EDIT HASH ARRAY MAPPED TRIE

Many of the EXPOSITOR scripts we have written use sets or maps to record information about the program execution. Unfortunately, a typical eager implementation of them could demand all items in the traces, defeating the intention of EXPOSITOR's lazy trace data structure. For example, consider the following code, which uses Python's standard (non-lazy) set type to collect all arguments in calls to a function `foo`:

```

93 foos = the_execution.breakpoints("foo") # void foo(int arg)
94 def collect_foo_args(lazy_acc, snap):
95     return lazy_acc.force().union( \
96         set([ int(snap.read_var("arg")) ]))
97 foo_args = foos.scan(collect_foo_args)

```

Notice that we must force `lazy_acc` to call the `union` method to create a deep copy of the updated set (lines 95–96). Unfortunately, forcing `lazy_acc` causes the immediately preceding set to be computed by recursively calling `collect_foo_args`. As a result, we must compute all preceding sets in the trace even if a particular query could be answered without doing so.

To address these problems, we developed the *edit hash array mapped trie* (*EditHAMT*), a new set, map, multiset, and multimap data structure that supports lazy construction and queries, to complement the trace data structure.

### A. Using the EditHAMT

From the user's perspective, the EditHAMT is an immutable data structure that maintains the entire history of edit operations for each EditHAMT. Fig. 3 shows a portion of the basic API. The class `edithamt` includes `find(k)` and `find_multi(k)` methods to look up the existence of keys and the mapped-to values, respectively. (We omit set/multiset operations and some multimap operations for brevity). EditHAMT operations are implemented as class methods: calling `edithamt.addkeyvalue(lazy_eh, k, v)` and `edithamt.remove(lazy_eh, k)` makes new EditHAMTs that extend their EditHAMT arguments by adding a binding or removing a binding; we can pass **None** into `lazy_eh` for an empty EditHAMT. The `lazy_eh` argument to both methods is

lazy so that we need not force it until a call to `find` or `find_multi` demands a result.

The last class method, `edithamt.concat(lazy_eh1, lazy_eh2)`, concatenates the edit history in `lazy_eh2` to the edit history of `lazy_eh1`. For example, consider the following code:

```
111 eh_rem = edithamt.remove(None, "x")
112 eh_add = edithamt.addkeyvalue(None, "x", 42)
113 eh = edithamt.concat(eh_add, eh_rem)
```

Here `eh` is the empty EditHAMT, since it contains the additions in `eh_add` followed by the removals in `eh_rem`. A common EXPOSITOR script pattern is to map a trace to a sequence of EditHAMT additions and removals, and then use `edithamt.concat` with `scan` or `tscan` to concatenate those edits.

As a concrete example, consider the race detector used in our Firefox case study (Section V). To implement it, we must compare each memory access against prior accesses to the same location, from any thread. Since UndoDB serializes thread schedules, we need only compare each read against the immediately preceding write, and each write against all preceding reads up to and including the immediately preceding write. We can use the EditHAMT as a multimap to track the access history of two variables, `var1` and `var2`:

```
114 def access_events(var):
115     reads = the_execution \
116         .watchpoints(var, rw=READ) \
117         .map(lambda s: edithamt.addkeyvalue( \
118             None, var, ("read", s.get_thread_id())))
119     writes = the_execution \
120         .watchpoints(var, rw=WRITE) \
121         .map(lambda s: edithamt.addkeyvalue( \
122             edithamt.remove(None, var), \
123             var, ("write", s.get_thread_id())))
124     return reads.merge(None, writes)
125 access_history = \
126     access_events("var1").merge(access_events("var2")) \
127     .tscan(edithamt.concat)
```

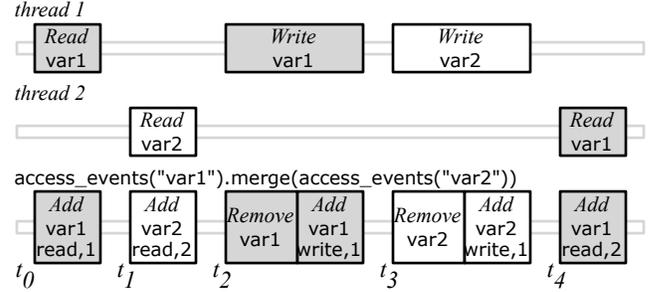
Here, we first create a function `access_events`, which finds all accesses to a variable `var` (lines 114–124). In this function, we create a trace `reads` that finds all reads to `var` using the `watchpoints` method (lines 115–116), and then maps each snapshot to singleton EditHAMTs binding `var` to a tuple of "read" and the ID of the running thread (lines 117–118). Similarly, we create the trace `writes` for writes to `var` (lines 119–120), but map it instead to an EditHAMT that first removes all prior bindings for `var` (line 122), then adds a binding to a tuple containing "write" and the thread ID (lines 121–123). We then merge `reads` and `writes`, and return it (line 124). Finally, we use `merge` to merge two traces, `access_events("var1")` and `access_events("var2")`, corresponding to accesses to the `var1` and `var2` respectively, and then use `tscan` with `edithamt.concat` to concatenate the sequence of EditHAMTs to create the final `access_history` (lines 125–127).

Since methods that create traces—such as `watchpoints`, `merge` and `tscan`—are lazy, the code above completes immediately, and the edit operations will only be expanded, and the underlying traces forced, as necessary. For example, this

would happen if we requested the last memory access before the end of the execution (time "inf"):

```
128 last = access_history.get_before("inf")
```

To see laziness in action, consider applying the above analysis to an execution matching the following diagram, which depicts two threads at the top and the corresponding EditHAMT operations at the bottom (accesses to `var1` are highlighted in gray):



Now suppose we print the latest access to `var1` at time  $t_4$  using the `find` method:

```
129 >>> print last.find("var1")
130 ("read", 1)
```

Because "var1" was just added at time  $t_4$ , answering this query will only force the EditHAMT and query the time-travel debugger at time  $t_4$ , and not before.

As another example, suppose we want to find all accesses to `var1` from the last access backwards using `find_multi`:

```
131 >>> for mem_access in last.find_multi("var1"):
132     print mem_access
133 ("read", 2)
134 ("write", 1)
```

Here since all "var1" bindings added prior to time  $t_2$  were removed at time  $t_2$ , the results are computed without forcing any EditHAMTs or querying the debugger before time  $t_2$ .

## B. Implementation

Due to lack of space we can only discuss the EditHAMT implementation briefly. The EditHAMT is inspired by the *hash array mapped trie* (HAMT) [8]: like the HAMT, the EditHAMT is a hybrid data structure that combines the fast lookup of a hash table and the memory efficiency of a trie. Essentially, the HAMT is a modification of a hash table: just as a hash table uses an array of buckets to map hashes of keys to key-value bindings, the HAMT uses an *array mapped trie* (AMT)—a trie that maps fixed-width integer keys to values—for the same purpose; hash collisions are resolved using nested HAMTs with different hash functions.

We developed the EditHAMT by making two changes to the traditional HAMT. First, we replaced the AMT with the *LazyAMT*, which supports lazy, rather than eager, updates. Second, we resolve hash collisions, as well as support remove operations, using *EditLists*, which are lazy linked-lists of nodes tallying edit operations on the EditHAMT; the tails are lazily retrieved from the prior EditHAMT.

By representing a set as a list of edit operations rather than by the elements it contains, the EditList allows us to modify a set by simply appending an add or remove operation to the list, and thus, without needing to know the rest of the set, i.e., without forcing the source EditList; and likewise for maps, multisets and multimaps. However, a query on an EditList is slow since it takes  $O(n)$ , where  $n$  is the number of edit operations. So instead, we build multiple EditLists, each containing only edits for values with the same hash, and use the LazyAMT to map hashes to EditLists, reducing the cost of lookups to  $O(1)$  if we assume no hash collisions. Furthermore, it is more memory efficient to make an updated copy of a LazyAMT in the EditHAMT, since only the nodes along the path to the updated binding need to be copied, than it is to make a copy of the bucket array in a hash table, which can be much larger. This makes it viable to store every intermediate EditHAMT as it is being created in a trace.

Map lookups in EditHAMTs are similar to set membership queries and are also  $O(1)$  if we assume no hash collisions. Multiset and multimap lookups are also  $O(1)$  per added element or binding on average; however, if we remove individual elements or bindings, then lookups become  $O(n)$ , where  $n$  is the number of remove operations.

#### V. FIREFOX CASE STUDY: DELAYED DEALLOCATION BUG

To put EXPOSITOR to the test, we used it to track down a subtle bug in Firefox that caused it to use more memory than expected.<sup>4</sup> The bug report contains a test page that, when scrolled, creates a large number of temporary JavaScript objects that should be immediately garbage collected. When we load and scroll the test page in a version of Firefox that exhibits the bug (revision c5e3c81d35ba), we observe the memory usage increases by 70MB, and does not go down until we scroll a second time, after which the extra memory is released 20 seconds later (as reported by top). As it turns out, this bug has never been directly fixed—the actual cause is a data race, but the official fix instead papers over the problem by adding another GC trigger.

We debugged the actual underlying fault using the following process. Our initial hypothesis is that there is a problem in the JavaScript garbage collector (GC). To test this hypothesis, we first run Firefox under EXPOSITOR, load the test page, and scroll it twice, temporarily interrupting the execution to call the `_execution.get_time()` just before each scroll,  $t_{scroll1}$  and  $t_{scroll2}$ , and after the memory usage decreases,  $t_{end}$ . Then, we create several traces to help us understand the GC and track down the bug, as summarized in Fig. 4.

First, we try to understand the GC behavior using a trace of the calls to (`gc_calls`) and returns from (`gc_return`) function `js_GC` (Fig. 4a).<sup>5</sup> Also, we find out when memory is allocated or released to the operating system using `mmap2` and `munmap` traces of the same-named system calls (Fig. 4b). Printing these traces between  $t_{scroll1}$  and  $t_{end}$  reveals some unusual

behavior: the GC is called only once after  $t_{scroll1}$ , but five times after  $t_{scroll2}$ ; and memory is allocated after  $t_{scroll1}$  and deallocated just before  $t_{end}$ .

At this point, we suspect that it may be important for the GC to be called several times. Inspecting the call stack of snapshots in `gc_calls`, we discover that the first `js_GC` call after a scroll is triggered by a scroll event, but subsequent calls are triggered by a timer. So we wrote a function called `set_tracing` that creates a trace for analyzing set-like behavior, using an EditHAMT to track when values are inserted into a set. Then, we apply `set_tracing` to the timer to create `timer_trace` treating timer creation as set insertion, and timer triggering as set removal (Fig. 4c). This trace tells us that the timers that trigger the GC are created by the immediately preceding `js_GC` call, but no timer is set for the first scroll.

From inspecting the call stack that creates a timer, we learn that the timer is created only when an instance variable `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` is non-zero. However, we find that, at the first `gc_return` snapshot, `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` is zero, which means a timer was not created. So we created a watchpoint trace on `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` that tells us when its value changes; printing the trace between the first and third `gc_call` snapshot shows us that its value becomes non-zero after the end of `js_GC` call, and that the first GC timer is triggered by accident as `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` remained non-zero through the second `js_GC` call. (Fig. 4d).

Inspecting call stacks again, we find that `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` is changed in a separate helper thread, and from reading the code, it appears that the GC owns a mutex lock that is used throughout the GC, but not around `gcChunksWaitingToExpire`. We suspect that there is a data race. Thus, we developed a simple race detection script, `one_lock`, that works by comparing each access to a chosen variable against prior accesses from different threads (Section IV-A explains how we track prior accesses), and checking if a particular lock was acquired or released prior to those accesses. For each pair of accesses, if at least one access is a write, and the lock was not held in either access, then there is a race, which we indicate as an output trace item containing the snapshot of the prior access. We apply this race detector to `gcChunksWaitingToExpire` and discover that, after  $t_{scroll1}$ , there is a write that races with a prior read at the point when the timer should have been created (Fig. 4e).

To give a sense of EXPOSITOR’s performance, it takes 2m6s to run the test page to  $t_{scroll2}$  while printing the `gc_call` trace, with a maximum resident memory of 383MB.<sup>6</sup> The equivalent task in UndoDB without EXPOSITOR takes 2m19s and uses 351MB of memory (some difference is unavoidable as the test requires user input, and Firefox has many sources of non-determinism). As another data point, finding the race after  $t_{scroll1}$  takes 37s and another 5.4MB of memory.

The two analyses we developed, `set_tracing` and `one_lock`, take only 10 and 40 lines of code to implement, respectively,

<sup>4</sup>[https://bugzilla.mozilla.org/show\\_bug.cgi?id=654028](https://bugzilla.mozilla.org/show_bug.cgi?id=654028)

<sup>5</sup>The `index=-1` optional argument to `execution.breakpoints` indicates that the breakpoint should be set at the end of the function.

<sup>6</sup>This includes all of GDB, since EXPOSITOR is a library within GDB’s Python scripting environment.

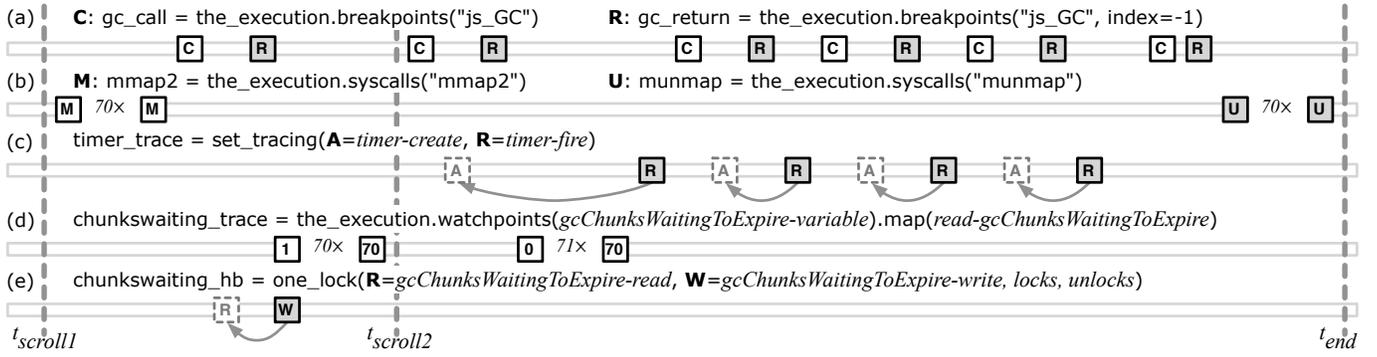


Fig. 4. Timeline of items in traces used to debug Firefox.

and both can be reused in other debugging contexts.

## VI. RELATED WORK

EXPOSITOR provides scripting for time-travel debuggers, with the central idea that a target program’s execution can be manipulated (i.e., queried and computed over) as a first-class object. Prior work on time-travel debugging has largely provided low-level access to the underlying execution, without the availability of a full-featured programming language for scripting. Of the prior work on scriptable debugging, EXPOSITOR is most similar to work that views the program as an event generator—with events seeded from function calls, memory reads/writes, etc.—and script programs consist of database-style queries over these streams, or of dataflow-oriented stream transformers. None of this scripting work includes the notion of time travel or operating over the whole execution.

### A. Time-travel debuggers

Broadly speaking, there are two classes of time-travel debuggers. *Omniscient debuggers* work by logging the state of the program being debugged after every instruction, and then reconstructing the state from the log on demand. Some examples of omniscient debuggers include ODB [9], Amber (also known as Chronicle) [5], Tralfamadore [10], and TOD [11]. In contrast, *replay debuggers* work by logging the results of system calls the program makes (as well as other sources of nondeterminism) and making intermediate checkpoints, so that the debugger can reconstruct a requested program state by starting at a checkpoint and replaying the program with the logged system calls. Several recent debuggers of this style include URDB [12] and UndoDB [4] (which we used in our prototype) for user-level programs, and TTVM [13] and VMware ReTrace [14] for entire virtual machines. EXPOSITOR could target either style of debugger in principle, but replay debugging scales much better (e.g., about  $1.7\times$  recording overhead for UndoDB vs.  $300\times$  for Amber).

The above work focuses on implementing time travel efficiently; most systems provide very simple APIs for accessing the underlying execution, and do not consider how time travel might best be exploited by debugging scripts.

UndoDB is a GDB extension, and GDB provides a Python scripting environment. However, this environment simply

gives a Python program a way to execute GDB (and UndoDB) commands. The resulting callback-oriented, imperative style can be tedious. For example, simply counting the number of calls to a particular function takes 16 lines of Python code, and cannot be composed with other scripts (e.g., to refine the count to calls satisfying a certain predicate  $p$ ). EXPOSITOR’s notion of traces is simpler and more composable. For example, function call counting is done in one line by computing the length of a trace of breakpointed calls; to refine the count, we simply filter the trace with  $p$  before counting.

Tralfamadore [15] considers generalizing standard debugging commands to entire executions, but does not provide a way to customize these commands with scripts.

Whyline is a kind of omniscient debugger with which users can ask “*why did*” and “*why didn’t*” questions about the control- and data-flow in the execution, e.g., “*why did this Button’s visible = true*” or “*why didn’t Window appear*” [16]. Whyline records execution events (adding  $1.7\times$  to  $8.5\times$  overhead), and when debugging begins, it uses program slicing [17] to generate questions and the corresponding answers (imposing up to a  $20\times$  further slowdown). Whyline is good at what it does, but its lack of scriptability limits its reach; it is hard to see how we might have used it to debug the Firefox memory leak, for example. In concept, Whyline can be implemented on top of EXPOSITOR, but limitations of GDB and UndoDB (in particular, the high cost of software watchpoints, and the inability to track data-flow through registers) makes it prohibitively expensive to track fine-grained data-flow in an execution. It would be interesting future work to overcome this limitation, for example, using EDDI [18] to implement fast software watchpoints.

### B. High-level (non-callback oriented) debugging scripts

EXPOSITOR’s design was inspired by MzTake [2], a Scheme-based, interactive, scriptable debugger for Java based on *functional reactive programming*. In MzTake, the program being debugged is treated as a source of *event streams* consisting of events such as function calls or value changes. Event streams can be manipulated with combinators that filter, map, fold, or merge events to derive new event streams. As such, an event stream in MzTake is like a trace in EXPOSITOR. Compu-

tations in MzTake are implicitly over the most recent value of a stream and are evaluated eagerly as the target program runs. To illustrate, consider our example of maintaining a shadow stack from Section II-A. In MzTake, we would run the target program, and when it calls a function a new snapshot event `s` becomes available on the calls stream. The `calls_rets` stream's most recent event is the most recent of of calls and rets, so MzTake updates it to `s`. Since `shadow_stacks` is derived from `calls_rets`, MzTake updates its most recent event by executing `map(int, s.read_retaddrs())`.

This eager updating of event streams, as the program executes, can be less efficient than using EXPOSITOR. In particular, EXPOSITOR traces are evaluated lazily as much as possible, and computation can be narrowed to particular slices of time. In Section II-A, we find the *latest* smashed stack address, and can avoid maintaining the shadow stack for the entire program execution, as would be required for MzTake. In general, EXPOSITOR traces are time indexed, but MzTake event streams are not: there is no analogue to `tr.get_at(i)` or `tr.slice(t0,t1)` in MzTake. We have found that time indexing is very useful for interactivity: we can run scripts that identify interesting moments in execution, and then explore the execution before and after that time. Similarly, since we are dealing with a single execution, we can learn something useful from the end of the execution (e.g., the address of a memory address that is double-freed), and then use it in a script on an earlier part of the execution (e.g., looking for where that address was first freed). MzTake requires a re-run of the program, which can be a problem if nondeterminism affects the relevant computation.

Dalek [19] and Event Based Behavioral Abstraction (EBBA) [20] bear some resemblance to MzTake and suffer the same drawbacks, but are much lower-level, e.g., the programmer is responsible for manually managing the firing and suppression of events. Coca [21] is a Prolog-based query language that allows users to write predicates over program states; program execution is driven by Prolog backtracking, e.g., to find the next state to match the predicate. Coca provides a `retrace` primitive that restarts the entire execution to match against new predicates. This is not true time travel but re-execution, and thus suffers the same problems as MzTake.

PTQL [22], PQL [23], and UFO [24] are declarative languages for querying program executions, as a debugging aid. Queries are implemented by instrumenting the program to gather the relevant data. In principle, these languages are subsumed by EXPOSITOR, as it is straightforward to compile queries to traces. Running queries in EXPOSITOR would allow programmers to combine results from multiple queries, execute queries lazily, and avoid having to recompile (and potentially perturb the execution of) the program for each query. On the other hand, it remains to be seen whether EXPOSITOR traces would be as efficient as using instrumentation.

## VII. CONCLUSION

We have introduced EXPOSITOR, a novel scriptable, time-travel debugging system. EXPOSITOR allows developers to

project the program execution onto traces, which support a range of powerful combinators including `map`, `filter`, `merge`, and `scan`. Working with traces gives the developer a global view of the program, and provides a convenient way to correlate and understand events across the execution timeline. For efficiency, EXPOSITOR traces are implemented using a lazy, interval-tree-like data structure. EXPOSITOR materializes the tree nodes on demand, ultimately calling UndoDB to retrieve appropriate snapshots of the program execution. EXPOSITOR also includes the EditHAMT, which lets script writers create lazy sets, maps, multisets, and multimaps that integrate with traces without compromising their laziness. We used EXPOSITOR to find a buffer overflow in a small program, and to diagnose a very complex, subtle bug in Firefox. We believe that EXPOSITOR is a useful tool for helping developers understand complex bugs in large software systems.

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