Py-holmes: Causal Testing for Deep Neural Networks in Python

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ABSTRACT
Deep learning has become a go-to solution for many problems. This increases the importance of our ability to understand and improve these technologies. While many tools exist to support debugging deep learning models (e.g., DNNs), few attempt to provide support for understanding the root cause of unexpected behavior. Causal testing is a technique that has been shown to help developers understand and fix the root causes of defects. Causal testing may be particularly valuable in DNNs, where causality is often hard to understand due to the abstractions DNNs create to represent data. In theory, causal testing is capable of supporting root cause debugging in various types of programs and software systems. However, the only implementation that exists is in Java and was not implemented as an end-to-end tool or for use on DNNs, making validation of this theory difficult. In this paper, we introduce py-holmes, a prototype tool that supports causal testing on Python programs, for both DNNs and shallow programs. For more information about py-holmes’ internal process, see our GitHub repository: https://go.gmu.edu/pyHolmes_Public_Repo. Our demo video can be found here: https://go.gmu.edu/pyholmes_demo_2024.

CCS CONCEPTS
• Software and its engineering → Software testing and debugging; • Computing methodologies → Neural networks; • Applied computing → Optical character recognition.

KEYWORDS
Deep Learning, Counterfactual Explanation, Causal Testing, Adversarial Sample Generation

1 INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION
As deep learning (DL) has become more ubiquitous, there has been an increased interest in promoting software engineering practices, such as testing and debugging, in the context of deep learning model development [1]. Researchers have proposed a variety of solutions to support debugging deep neural networks (DNNs) [2–11], including attempts at supporting root-cause debugging. However, to our knowledge and unlike Causal Testing [12], these interventions have not been evaluated regarding their ability to help developers understand the causes of their code’s behavior. Furthermore, existing tools for debugging DNNs lack support for verifiable explanations (such as counterfactual ones) which would aid reasoning about the root causes of defects [1, 5, 6, 11, 13].

Causal testing is a technique that has been shown to help developers understand the root causes of unexpected behavior [12] and that can help programmers understand what the defect was and where it occurred. Unlike existing debugging techniques that help programmers understand the how of the code, causal testing helps programmers answer the why, such that they can produce fixes that address the root cause of the defect.

Causal testing has the potential to support root cause debugging for both DNNs and traditional (shallow) software. However, the current implementation (Holmes1) is only designed for shallow software in Java, whereas Python is much more prevalent for DL software [14]. Furthermore, the current version of Holmes is a proof of concept that requires additional effort to make it fully functional. To this end, we present py-holmes, a prototype tool that provides Python causal testing support for both DNNs and shallow programs.

In deep learning, py-holmes can offer two primary benefits. First, py-holmes explains failed tests by generating counterfactual input samples, which are similar to the original test input, but on which the model exhibits less loss, or perhaps passes the test. The differences between these new samples and the original reveal which features originally confounded the model, and these explanations can be verified by running these samples through the user’s model and confirming the model’s loss is as py-holmes reported. This verifiability could be useful in fairness testing, where surrogate models are commonly trained to explain mistakes made by a base model, but often fail to accurately represent its decision-making [15]. Second, py-holmes could help developers identify underrepresented regions of the feature space, and point the way toward new natural samples that could improve the model’s performance in those regions.

1 https://holmes.cs.umass.edu
2 PY-HOLMES: PYTHON CAUSAL TESTING

Py-holmes shows the developer a set of variant test inputs, where each is minimally different from the original failing input in terms of both value difference and execution difference, but elicits program behavior that passes, or comes closer to passing, the original unit test. As a step forward from Holmes, py-holmes includes a novel DL mode alongside the existing shallow mode. In shallow mode, py-holmes generates counterfactual inputs for unit tests of shallow software, similarly to Holmes. In DL mode, py-holmes generates counterfactual inputs for DNNs implemented with PyTorch. Along with these inputs, py-holmes also presents the developer with a summary of code coverage differences (for tests of shallow software) or neuron activation differences (for tests of deep neural networks) versus the original input. These inputs and execution difference summaries are intended to aid the developer in understanding why the original failure occurred. Figure 2 shows a sample report for a shallow test, where the removal of an apostrophe from an input string caused a previously failing test to pass. Figure 5 shows a sample report for a DL test.

Py-holmes’ two modes use similar principles, with different implementations. Table 1 analogizes the DL and shallow modes.

Table 1: Comparison of py-holmes’ deep and shallow modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Shallow</th>
<th>DL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Literals</td>
<td>Tensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar value generation</td>
<td>Random character edits (for strings), adding noise (for numbers)</td>
<td>Assitive sample generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execution similarity metric</td>
<td>$d_{line} + 10d_{call}$</td>
<td>Cosine distance of final embedding layer activations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test case filtering</td>
<td>Find 3 passing and 3 failing tests that elicit the most similar execution trace to the original</td>
<td>Find 3 passing and 3 failing inputs that elicit the most similar activation pattern to the original</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1 Shallow Mode Process

2.1.1 Generating Variant Tests. Py-holmes produces variant tests by perturbing (“fuzzing”) one or more literals contained in a failing test. To avoid unintentionally fuzzing oracle-defining literals, py-holmes constructs a directed graph of the unit test method in which each literal and variable name is represented as a node. For each “=” assignment that appears in the method, directed edges are drawn from all literals and variable names on the right side of the “=” to all variable names on the left side. Any literal node from which an oracle node can be reached by following this graph is considered to be involved in defining an oracle, and is therefore protected from fuzzing. When an input value has been designated for fuzzing, the nature of the fuzzing depends on its type. A string will undergo random character edits (eg “door” to “dmor”), whereas a number will undergo slight perturbations (eg 3 to 2, or 10.5 to 10.641).

If the user’s repository contains any other test methods that are both scope-similar (importing a nonempty subset of the same user-written files) and call-similar (calling the same functions in the same order) to the original test method, fuzzed variants are produced from these tests as well. This allows py-holmes to create valid variants of string enums without needing to chance upon them via random character edits.

2.1.2 Filtering Variant Tests for Similar Execution to the Original. Py-holmes runs the original test, as well as all variant tests produced in the previous step, and records their full execution traces. Next py-holmes filters the variant tests for the 3 passing and 3 failing tests that had the most similar execution traces to the original test’s execution trace. The distance between two execution traces is $d_{line} + 10d_{call}$, where $d_{line}$ is the number of single-line changes to the sequence of source line executions, and $d_{call}$ is the number of changes to what functions are called, and at what points in the trace. Py-holmes concludes by showing the user a report containing these 6 tests, along with diffs for their source code and execution traces when compared to the original test.

2.2 DL Mode Process

Figure 3 depicts py-holmes’ internal process in DL mode.

2.2.1 Generating Variant Inputs. Py-holmes runs the original failing input (a PyTorch tensor) through the model under test, and obtains the loss gradient with respect to that input. This gradient is then multiplied by an adjustment rate set by the user and subtracted...
from the input to create a new input that will elicit a lower loss. This process is identical to adversarial sample generation, except it descends the loss gradient instead of ascending it [16]. Inspired by this name, we call our approach assistive sample generation. Py-holmes iterates this process, generating a sequence of inputs, each one incrementally farther from the original but eliciting smaller losses from the model as long as the adjustment rate is low enough.

2.2.2 Filtering Variant Inputs for Similar Execution to the Original. Next py-holmes filters the variant inputs produced in the previous step for the 3 passing and 3 failing inputs that caused the most similar neuron activation pattern to the original in the final embedding layer of the model. Activation similarity is measured using cosine distance (defined as $1 - \frac{s^2}{w}$, where $s$ is the cosine similarity). Py-holmes concludes by showing the user a report containing these 6 inputs, along with the model’s loss on each input, the neuron activation distance of the final embedding versus the original, and the value of the new input tensor.

3 PY-HOLMES WITH NEURAL NETWORKS

Suppose a user is building a fully connected DNN to classify digits from the MNIST database. The MNIST database contains labeled, grayscale images of handwritten digits 0-9, with a resolution of 28x28 pixels [17]. Given an image from the MNIST database, the user’s model guesses which digit is written in the image.

We used the MNIST database to informally evaluate py-holmes during its development, because the database’s pictoral nature made it easy to visualize py-holmes’ changes to inputs. However, py-holmes’ DL mode can be used on any tensor input, including non-pictoral inputs such as vectors. We intend to perform a user study of py-holmes on a greater diversity of datasets, along with a comparative analysis between py-holmes and other tools.

After training their model, the user evaluates it on a validation dataset. They notice that their model misclassifies a particularly obvious handwritten 5, despite otherwise performing well. They want more insight into why the failure occurred, in order to make a more informed decision about how to adjust the way they train their model.

The user decides to use py-holmes to find nearby inputs that would have passed, thereby explaining the failure. They write a unit test-style unit test of their model on that input, shown in Figure 4, inside of a new file, which they choose to name my_test.py. This unit test instantiates all of the required variables for py-holmes to run in its deep learning mode. The purpose of each variable in this unit test is discussed further in our artifact’s readme file.

Now the user calls py-holmes from the command line with python py_holmes.py -dl -f my_test.py -l all. Py-holmes finds variants of the user’s input and prints the readout shown in Figure 5, which gives the three passing and three failing inputs which elicited the smallest changes in the final embedding layer.

Although the tensors contain visual information, py-holmes outputs its tensors as text. The user decides to use matplotlib to visualize the tensors and heatmaps of the pixel value changes. This visualization is shown in Figure 6 and can be reproduced by running the Jupyter Notebook mnist_demo.ipynb in our artifact. From the visualization, the user concludes that their model failed because it over-relies on 5s that cross into the red areas of the plots.

Prior research has demonstrated that adversarial sample generation can be used as an effective data augmentation approach to improve robustness [18], but that introducing non-natural adversarial samples into a training dataset may reduce overall accuracy [19]. Because py-holmes’ variant inputs are unnatural and assistive rather than adversarial, they should not be added directly to the training dataset, but they can guide a developer’s search for new natural data to add to the training dataset. In the case of MNIST, a developer can hand-draw new natural samples informed by py-holmes’ variant inputs, as shown in Figure 7. We hypothesize that new natural samples avoiding densely red areas would...
with Hypothesis identifying faults, and py-holmes explaining them. Testing tool, Holmes [12], which is tailored for JUnit tests. This tool exhibits methodological parallels with py-holmes, especially in the generation of slightly varied inputs and runtimes. We hypothesize that a version of py-holmes which instead ascends the loss gradient could produce useful samples for augmenting the training dataset even outside the zone of local monotonicity, because no acts of reflection would be involved in generating the samples. We intend to test these hypotheses soon in our user study. We also hope to further integrate py-holmes with PyTorch, to eliminate the user’s overhead work of writing unit tests for the inputs they wish to pass to py-holmes.

4 RELATED WORK

Most relevant to this work is the development of the original Causal Testing tool, Holmes [12], which is tailored for JUnit tests. This tool identifies flaws in users’ code by searching for test inputs that falsify an intended invariant for that code [21]. Hypothesis and py-holmes could be used in tandem when debugging shallow software, with Hypothesis identifying faults, and py-holmes explaining them. DeepDiagnosis demonstrates enhanced precision and efficiency in identifying faults, locating bugs, and recognizing symptoms [10].

5 CONTRIBUTIONS & FUTURE WORK

We introduced py-holmes, a tool for helping programmers understand the root causes of Python unit test failures in traditional and deep learning programs. We characterized how a software developer can use py-holmes to find such a root cause and work to adjust their software accordingly. We are currently designing a user study to evaluate py-holmes’ ability to support root cause understanding and debugging in practical scenarios.

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DATA-AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Release v1.0.1 of our GitHub repository is available as an artifact on Zenodo [22]. This artifact’s readme file contains instructions for installing py-holmes and reproducing our results.
REFERENCES


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