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Making reliable distributed systems in the presence of software errors

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A Dissertation submitted to
the Royal Institute of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Technology
The Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden

The thesis defense will take place on Friday December 5th at 10:00 at the IT
Universitet KTH Kista Sal 4.

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Abstract

The work described in this thesis is the result of a research program started in 1981 to find better ways of programming Telecom applications. These applications are large programs which despite careful testing will probably contain many errors when the program is put into service. We assume that such programs do contain errors, and investigate methods for building reliable systems despite such errors.

The research has resulted in the development of a new programming language (called Erlang), together with a design methodology, and set of libraries for building robust systems (called OTP). At the time of writing the technology described here is used in a number of major Ericsson, and Nortel products. A number of small companies have also been formed which exploit the technology.

The central problem addressed by this thesis is the problem of constructing reliable systems from programs which may themselves contain errors. Constructing such systems imposes a number of requirements on any programming language that is to be used for the construction. I discuss these language requirements, and show how they are satisfied by Erlang.

Problems can be solved in a programming language, or in the standard libraries which accompany the language. I argue how certain of the requirements necessary to build a fault-tolerant system are solved in the language, and others are solved in the standard libraries. Together these form a basis for building fault-tolerant software systems.

No theory is complete without proof that the ideas work in practice. To demonstrate that these ideas work in practice I present a number of case studies of large commercially successful products which use this technology. At the time of writing the largest of these projects is a major Ericsson product, having over a million lines of Erlang code. This product (the AXD301) is thought to be one of the most reliable products ever made by Ericsson.

Finally, I ask if the goal of finding better ways to program Telecom applications was fulfilled—I also point to areas where I think the system could be improved.

TRITA-IMIT-LECS AVH 03:09

ISSN 1651-4076

ISRN KTH/IMIT/LECS/AVH-03/09-SE

and

SICS Dissertation Series 34

ISSN 1101-1335

ISRN SICS-D-34-SE