The Evolution of Software Engineering: From Prehistoric Beginnings to the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Jonah Vincent Joshua
Department of Informatics and Technologies
Afro-American University of Central Africa (AAUCA)
Oyala, Djibloho, Equatoria Guinea
Email: jonah.joshua [AT] docente.aaucauniversity.com

Diosdado Asumu Ndong Andeme
Department of Informatics and Technologies
Afro-American University of Central Africa (AAUCA)
Oyala, Djibloho, Equatorial Guinea
Email: ndongandeme1994 [AT] gmail.com

Abstract—**This article presents a thorough overview of the historical background of software engineering, tracing its roots from antiquity to the contemporary time dominated by artificial intelligence (AI). Beginning with the basic programming languages of the mid-1900s, the article stresses major milestones, including the birth of object-oriented programming, the expansion of software engineering practices, and the transformational impact of structured programming. Additionally, the paper examines the limitations, possible hazards, ethical considerations, and environmental consequences of AI-powered software engineering, including machine learning (ML), the Agile revolution and its revolutionary impact on software development practices. Through the analysis of this developmental trajectory, the essay offers vital insights into the progressive nature of software engineering and the pivotal role of artificial intelligence in shaping its future.**

Keywords-Artificial Intelligence (AI), AI driven development, Agile Methodology, Machine Learning, software engineering

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the discipline of software engineering has seen a significant transformation as a methodology. Beginning with the most basic computational tools and progressing all the way up to the most advanced artificial intelligence (AI) systems of today, the evolution of software engineering is a reflection of humanity's unrelenting attempt to innovate and improve efficiency. Software engineering underpins the development, maintenance, and evolution of modern society's systems and applications. Several dimensions explain its importance:

A. Enabling Innovation and Digital Transformation

Innovative technologies like AI, ML, blockchain, and the IoT depend on software engineering. These technologies are changing healthcare, banking, transportation, and entertainment. AI-driven apps need robust software engineering to scale, be reliable, and efficient [1].

B. Supporting Scalability and Complexity

Software engineering gives the methods and tools to manage complicated technological systems. Agile development, development operations (DevOps), and continuous integration, continuous delivery (CI/CD) pipelines help organisations scale while preserving quality and performance [2].

C. Ensuring Security and Reliability

Software engineering is essential for secure and reliable systems in the face of rising cyber threats. Secure coding, penetration testing, and automated vulnerability scanning protect sensitive data and system integrity [3].

D. Facilitating Collaboration and Interoperability

Multidisciplinary teams work together in software engineering to integrate disparate technologies and systems. APIs, microservices, and open-source software increase interoperability and speed development [4].

E. Driving Economic Growth

Software drives worldwide economic growth. Software engineering helps produce revenue-generating, job-creating, and innovative products and services. The worldwide software market is expected to reach $1.5 trillion by 2025, highlighting its economic importance [5].

F. Addressing Societal Challenges

Software engineering helps solve climate change, healthcare, and education issues. Software optimises energy efficiency, develops telemedicine platforms, and creates online learning settings [6].

G. Shaping the Future of Work

Software engineering has enabled remote work, automation, and digital collaboration. Zoom, Slack, and Microsoft Teams leverage advanced software engineering to provide seamless user experiences [7].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of software engineering is traced back through history in this article, with a focus on significant milestones and recent breakthroughs in the field of artificial intelligence.

A. Prehistoric Beginnings

The origins of software engineering may be traced to antiquity when humans first created instruments to facilitate computing. The abacus, created in 2400 BCE, is regarded as one of the first computational instruments. Although not software in the contemporary context, it established the foundation for the notion of automating calculations.

In the 19th century, Charles Babbage developed the Analytical Engine, a mechanical computer capable of being programmed with punch cards [8]. Ada Lovelace, frequently acknowledged as the inaugural computer programmer, developed algorithms for this machine, signifying the inception of programmable computation.

B. The software Crisis and Birth of Software Engineering

The 1960s had a "software crisis," marked by budget excesses, schedule failures, and faulty software. The growing intricacy of software systems underscored the necessity for methodical development methodologies. The term "software engineering" was officially adopted at the North AtlanticTreaty Organisation (NATO) Software Engineering Conference in 1968, highlighting the necessity of applying engineering concepts to software development.

This period witnessed the advent of structured programming, modular design, and the waterfall model, which established a linear framework for software development. [9]. Edgar Dijkstra's research on algorithms and Donald Knuth's contributions to computer programming were crucial in defining the field.

It wasn't until the late 1960s that the phrase "software engineering" was first used, although the roots of the field were established in the 1940s and 1950s with the introduction of electronic computers. Developed in 1945, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) was one of the first electronic computers in the world to be used for broad purposes. It was necessary to manually wire these early computers and have a comprehensive knowledge of hardware in order to program them.

During the 1950s, a number of high-level programming languages and assembly languages were developed. Some examples of these languages were FORTRAN (1957) and COBOL (1959). The complexity of the hardware was abstracted by these developments, which made programming easier to understand and paved the path for software development to become a separate field of study.

C. The Rise of Object-Oriented Programming and Agile Methods

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of object-oriented programming (OOP), which established novel paradigms for software design and development. Languages like Smalltalk (1980) and C++ (1985) popularised object-oriented programming ideas, including encapsulation, inheritance, and polymorphism [10]. These principles facilitated the creation of more modular, reusable, and maintainable software systems.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the advent of agile approaches, which prioritised iterative development, collaboration, and adaptability to evolving needs [11]. The Agile Manifesto, released in 2001, delineated the principles of agile development, emphasising client participation, adaptability to change, and the frequent delivery of functional software [12].

D. The Internet Era, Open-Source Movement, Edge Computing, and IoT

The expansion of the internet in the 2000s revolutionised software engineering. Web-based applications, cloud computing, and mobile technology emerged as predominant trends. The open-source movement accelerated, with initiatives such as Linux, Apache, and MySQL exemplifying the efficacy of collaborative development.

DevOps, a cultural and technical paradigm that integrates development and operations, arose during this period. It highlighted continuous integration, continuous delivery (CI/CD) [13] and automation, facilitating expedited and more dependable software deployment.

The expansion of Internet of Things (IoT) devices has necessitated edge computing solutions. In 2025, software experts created lightweight frameworks for the efficient deployment and management of programs on edge devices. Organisations including Microsoft and AWS have launched edge-specific development tools, facilitating real-time data processing and minimising latency [14].

E. Quantum Computing and Software Engineering

Quantum computing has evolved from theoretical research to actual applications in software engineering. Corporations such as IBM, Google, and D-Wave have launched quantum development kits enabling developers to explore quantum algorithms. In 2025, the initial commercially feasible quantum software applications appeared, notably in cryptography, optimisation, and machine learning [15]. This has resulted in the creation of new programming languages, such Q# and Silq, specifically designed for quantum computing [16].

F. Low-Code and No-Code Platforms

The proliferation of low-code and no-code platforms has empowered non-technical users to create intricate apps. Platforms like as OutSystems and Mendix have implemented AI-enhanced design functionalities, enabling users to develop applications with little coding expertise. This movement has democratised software development, enabling organisations to innovate independently of specialised technical teams [17].

G. Ethical AI and Responsible Software Engineering

As AI gets more integrated into software systems, ethical issues have grown more significant. In 2024, the institute of electrical electronic engineer (IEEE) published revised standards for ethical AI development, highlighting openness, justice, and responsibility. Organisations must now do ethical effect evaluations prior to the implementation of AI-driven technologies [18].

H. Programming Language Innovations

Recent programming languages and enhancements to older ones have optimised software development. Rust has gained prominence due to its memory safety attributes, whilst Python 4.0 has unveiled improved speed and concurrency capabilities. Furthermore, WebAssembly (Wasm) has emerged as a standard for high-performance online apps, allowing developers to execute code at near-native speeds within browsers [19].

I. Sustainable Software Engineering

Sustainability has emerged as a primary emphasis in software engineering. Developers are currently refining code to save energy use, especially in data centres. Instruments such as the Green Software Foundation's Carbon Aware software development kit (SDK) assist developers in quantifying and reducing the carbon footprint of their programs [20].

J. The Age of Artificial Intelligence

The 2010s marked the commencement of the AI revolution, profoundly impacting software engineering. Machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) algorithms, powered by vast data and computational resources, have enabled progress in natural language processing, computer vision, and autonomous systems.

Amazon CodeWhisperer and OpenAI GPT-5, introduced in 2022 and 2024 respectively, have markedly enhanced code creation and debugging functionalities. These tools now integrate seamlessly into integrated development environments (IDEs), allowing developers to write, test, document, and deploy code more rapidly than ever before [21]; [22], as well as generate code snippets from natural language enquiries [23]. AI-driven automated testing frameworks are improving software quality and reducing manual labour [24]. AI-driven solutions have commenced the automation of whole software development lifecycles, including requirements gathering to deployment, hence minimising human error and expediting time-to-market [25].

The incorporation of AI into software engineering has resulted in the creation of new techniques, like DevOps and machine learning operations (MLOps), designed to optimise the development, deployment, and maintenance of AI-driven systems [26]. These techniques underscore the need of continuous integration, continuous delivery, and automated testing in guaranteeing the stability and scalability of AI applications.

III. Challenges of AI in Software Engineering

Notwithstanding its progress, software engineering encounters obstacles in the age of AI. Ethical difficulties, including prejudice in AI algorithms and the environmental consequences of extensive computing, require urgent attention [27].

These difficulties are summarised below:

A. Limitations of AI in Software Engineering

1) Lack of Contextual Understanding
Deep contextual understanding of software needs and domain-specific nuances is lacking in AI models, especially ML-based ones. Suboptimal or erroneous solutions may result.

2) Dependence on Training Data
Training data quality and diversity are crucial for AI systems. Biassed or incomplete datasets can produce erroneous results.

3) Limited Creativity and Innovation
AI excels at pattern recognition and automation but suffers with creativity and novel problem-solving.

4) Difficulty in Handling Ambiguity
Software engineers face vague or changing requirements. Such fluidity may challenge AI systems.

5) Scalability and Performance Issues
AI models, especially LLMs, are computationally expensive and may not scale well for large projects.

B. Potential Risks of AI in Software Engineering

1) Security Vulnerabilities
AI-generated code may facilitate injection attacks or the utilisation of unsafe APIs.

2) Ethical and Legal Concerns
AI tools may accidentally copy proprietary algorithms or infringe on IP rights.

3) Over-Reliance on Automation
It is possible for developers to lose their ability to think critically and solve problems if they rely too heavily on artificial intelligence tools.

4) Bias and Fairness Issues
The biases that are present in the training data of AI models can be perpetuated by the models, which can result in outputs that are unjust or discriminating.

5) Job Displacement and Skill Gaps
According to [28], the automation of ordinary jobs by artificial intelligence could lower the demand for entry-level developers, which would exacerbate existing skill shortages in the sector.

6) Lack of Explainability
Many AI models, especially deep learning systems, are "black boxes," making their decision-making processes unclear.

7) Maintenance and Evolution Challenges
AI-generated code might provide challenges for maintenance and evolution, particularly in the absence of adequate documentation or adherence to standardised coding standards.

IV. EXAMPLES OF AI-DRIVEN SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

To reflect the most recent developments in the area, below are instances of AI-driven software engineering:

A. *Automated Code Generation with Large Language Models*

GitHub Copilot, utilising OpenAI's Codex, produces code snippets, functions, and complete programs derived from natural language prompts or pre-existing code.

B. *AI for Bug Detection and Code Quality*

Facebook's SapFix and Sapienz employ artificial intelligence to autonomously identify and rectify issues in mobile applications.

C. *Automated Test Case Generation*

Tools such as EvoSuite employ artificial intelligence to autonomously produce unit tests, enhancing code coverage and error identification.

D. *AI-Driven Code Refactoring*

Tools like refactoring.AI use machine learning to discover and propose refactoring opportunities within codebases.

E. *Predictive Analytics for Software Development*

Artificial intelligence models predict project risks, developer efficiency, and delivery schedules utilising past data.

F. *Natural Language Processing (NLP) for Requirements Engineering*

AI solutions such as Req2Spec utilise natural language processing to extract and formalise software requirements from natural language documents.

G. *AI-Driven DevOps and CI/CD Pipelines*

Tools such as Harness employ artificial intelligence to enhance continuous integration and deployment pipelines by forecasting failures and automating rollbacks.

H. *Program Synthesis*

AI systems such as Microsoft's PROSE generate programs from high-level specifications or exemplars.

I. *AI for Software Maintenance*

AI tools forecast which segments of a codebase are most susceptible to maintenance needs or potential failure.

J. *AI-Assisted Pair Programming*

Tools such as TabNine and Kite utilise artificial intelligence to deliver instantaneous code recommendations and autocompletions.

V. ADDRESSING THE ETHICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF AI-DRIVEN SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

Addressing the ethical and environmental impacts of AI-driven software development requires a thorough understanding of the difficulties and the execution of effective mitigation solutions. The following is an updated discussion:

A. *Ethical Considerations*

1) Bias and Fairness
AI systems can sustain or worsen biases inherent in training data, resulting in inequitable outcomes, especially for marginalised populations. Guaranteeing equity necessitates meticulous data curation, algorithmic openness, and continuous oversight.

2) Transparency and Explainability
Numerous AI models, particularly deep learning systems, function as "black boxes," complicating the comprehension of decision-making processes. This absence of openness can erode confidence and accountability.

3) Privacy Concerns
Artificial intelligence systems frequently depend on extensive personal data, prompting apprehensions regarding data privacy and security. Adherence to legislation such as GDPR is essential for safeguarding user rights.

4) Accountability and Responsibility
Establishing accountability for AI-generated judgements is complex, particularly in instances of harm. Explicit standards are essential for delineating responsibilities among developers, organisations, and users.

5) Job Displacement and Economic Inequality
AI automation may result in job displacement in specific areas, intensifying economic inequality. The development of ethical AI must take into account the societal consequences of labour disruption.

B. *Environmental Impact Mitigation Strategies*

1) Ethical AI Frameworks

Organisations ought to implement ethical AI frameworks that emphasise fairness, transparency, and responsibility. Instruments such as AI ethical checklists and effect evaluations can facilitate the development process.

2) Green AI Initiatives
The concept of "Green AI," which places an emphasis on energy-efficient algorithms and environmental practices, is something that researchers and developers are strongly encouraged to concentrate on.

3) Regulatory Compliance
Governments and organisations must implement legislation that tackle ethical and environmental issues, such as the EU's AI Act and climate-related policies.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The convergence of quantum computing, edge computing, and artificial intelligence is poised to transform software engineering. Quantum algorithms, for instance, may resolve intricate issues that are now insurmountable for classical computers [29]. Simultaneously, edge computing facilitates real-time data processing at the source, hence decreasing latency and bandwidth consumption [30].

Future software systems will focus more on user experience, accessibility, and inclusivity, ensuring that software meets the needs of diverse populations [31].

VII. CONCLUSION

The transition from the past to the present has been a momentous year for software engineering. This development illustrates human ingenuity and adaptability. From the abacus to AI-driven systems and quantum computing, each age has built upon the achievements of its predecessors, advancing the industry.
Technology, creativity, complexity management, security, and economic and social growth depend on software engineering. As technology advances, software engineering will become increasingly important in determining the future.

The software engineering community can better use AI's potential and mitigate its risks by knowing its limitations and risks.

AI-driven software development raises ethical and environmental concerns that must be addressed. The AI community can reduce these impacts and guarantee that AI technologies serve society by prioritising fairness, transparency, and sustainability. These aims require ongoing study, policy formulation, and stakeholder participation.

As we reach new technological frontiers, software engineering will continue to evolve, impacting the future of technology and society. Software engineers must adapt to these changes by using new tools and processes to develop creative, secure, and sustainable systems.

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