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4th Conference on Extreme Programming and Agile Methods, 2004

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Wang, Y., and Erdogmus, H.
August 2004

* published in the Proceedings of the XP-Agile Universe. 4th Conference on Extreme Programming and Agile Methods. Calgary, Alberta, Canada. August 15-18, 2004. NRC 47413. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, No. 3134, Springer, 2004.

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The Role of Process Measurement in Test-Driven Development

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Abstract. Test-Driven Development (TDD) is a coding technique in which programmers write unit tests before writing or revising production code. We present a process measurement approach for TDD that relies on the analysis of fine-grained data collected during coding activities. This data is mined to produce abstractions regarding programmers' work patterns. Programmers, instructors, and coaches receive concrete feedback by visualizing these abstractions. Process measurement has the potential to accelerate the learning of TDD, enhance its effectiveness, aid in its empirical evaluation, and support project tracking.

1 Introduction

Test-Driven Development (TDD) [1-3] is a coding technique that relies on writing tests *before* implementation. The tests are written by the programmer using a unit testing framework such as JUnit [4]. Unit tests are incrementally added and all tests are periodically executed. Consequently, the program is regression tested as it is being developed.

This paper presents an unobtrusive approach for improving the effectiveness of TDD based on an analysis of programmers' coding and testing activities. First, we formalize the TDD process as a sequence of *programming cycles*, called a *cycle trace*. Cycle traces are visualized in different ways to obtain high-level information about the work patterns of programmers. This information in turn supports personal process improvement, education, empirical evaluation, and project tracking.

A single programming cycle involves writing unit tests and production code, and ends with a successful execution of tests. The formalization of a programming cycle allows a high-level representation of the programmer's coding and testing activities to be extracted from a record of low-level actions. These actions are captured using a third-party tool [5] that is integrated into the development environment. The logged actions track tool usage (JUnit) and changes to project resources; they are time-stamped and augmented with basic code metrics. Once the cycle trace is extracted in tabular form, further abstractions are

produced that zoom in on different aspects of the process followed by the programmer. These abstractions are presented as charts, which are visualized and interpreted.

Section 2 elaborates on the motivation of the work. Section 3 presents the approach. Section 4 presents the tabular representation of a cycle trace and discusses the interpretation of various charts derived from this representation. Finally, Section 5 presents conclusions and discusses future work.

2 Motivation

Inevitably, programmers with different experience levels, preferences, reasoning processes, and established work patterns will apply TDD in different ways. With meaningful feedback, programmers can correlate any changes in productivity and code quality with the way the technique is being applied. In turn, the awareness of the process followed helps programmers discover rhythms and patterns that work best in a given context. In addition, process data can provide useful insight regarding the status of the project, both in terms of progress and in terms of product quality. Johnson et al. [6] stress the importance of process measurement in personal process improvement and project tracking, but not specifically in the context of TDD.

Concrete, measurement-based feedback is also important from a pedagogical point of view. Although students who are exposed to TDD find it useful [7, 8] and obtain better productivity scores [8] and course grades [9], many students find TDD counterintuitive [10] and a majority find it more difficult to apply compared to conventional programming. In addition, students with higher skill ratings are able to leverage TDD better, and achieve more dramatic productivity improvements compared to students with lower skill ratings [8]. These findings imply that TDD may initially appear counterintuitive to novices and the effective application of this technique demands both discipline and mastery. Therefore, coaches and instructors can take advantage of process measurement to teach TDD to newcomers and to advance the skill level of veterans.

Discrepancies in empirical findings [8, 9, 11-14] [12] constitute a significant impediment to drawing generalized conclusions, and consequently, the findings remain valid only in the contexts in which they were produced. While several factors may account for the discrepancies (such as differences in populations, experiment tasks, teaching methods and materials, the technique with which TDD is compared), all of the studies mentioned suffer from a common pitfall of empirical software engineering: *process conformance* [8]. Process conformance is a threat to construct validity [15] related to the ability and willingness of subjects to follow a prescribed process. How do we know that the subjects apply TDD in the same way, or in the manner expected, both within and across studies? Although it is impossible to address process conformance in a fully objective manner, measurement should reduce the construct threat that it poses. Researchers often rely on self-assessment through questionnaires to gauge process conformance. Measurement can

complement self-assessment by allowing the comparison of the subjects' process measures with idealized patterns. In addition, measurement is useful in assessing maturation (achievement of sufficient experience in the investigated technique), which is a concern in TDD studies: productivity and quality measures taken will be more meaningful and valid if the subjects gain reasonable mastery beforehand. Therefore process measurement can play an important role in empirical evaluation, in terms of both enhancing the validity of the results and facilitating the comparison and aggregation of findings from multiple studies.

3 Approach

This section explains the process measurement approach taken. Section 3.1 formalizes the TDD process in terms of a cycle trace. Section 3.2 defines the high-level architecture for data collection and analysis of our prototype implementation. This architecture relies on a third-party tool for data collection. Section 3.3 explains how to mine the process data collected to recognize cycle traces.

3.1 Formalization of TDD Process

We represent the TDD process as a sequence of *programming cycles*, called a *cycle trace*. Each programming cycle in turn is composed of more elementary *blocks* representing three distinct types of activities. A *TestCode* block is defined as a contiguous sequence of coding activities that involves only writing or revising tests. A *TestCode* block is typically followed by a *ProductionCode* block, which is a contiguous sequence of activities that involves only writing or revising production code. The *TestCode-ProductionCode* sub-cycle can be repeated several times, but usually a *ProductionCode* block is immediately followed by the execution of a series of tests. A contiguous sequence of test executions is a *TestExecution* block. A *TestExecution* block that is (100%) successful (represented by a green bar in JUnit) indicates the end of a programming cycle. An unsuccessful, or failing, *TestExecution* block (represented by a red bar in JUnit) marks the end of a sub-cycle, which we call a *CycleElement*. Thus, a single programming cycle is composed of several *CycleElements*, the last of which ends with a successful *TestExecution* block.

Formally, a cycle trace is defined by the following regular expressions:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CycleElement}(x) &= (\text{TestCode} \mid \text{ProductionCode})^+ \text{TestExecution}(x) \\ \text{ProgrammingCycle} &= \text{CycleElement}(\text{fail})^* \text{CycleElement}(\text{pass}) \\ \text{CycleTrace} &= \text{ProgrammingCycle}^+ \end{aligned}$$

Here $x \in \{\text{fail}, \text{pass}\}$ differentiates between failing and successful `TestExecution` blocks and `CycleElements`. Note that the regular expressions describe a generic process that is not strictly TDD-compliant. For example, they recognize variant cycles where the programmer writes the tests after the production code. Such non-compliant cycles should be occasionally expected in TDD, but they are normally not persistent if TDD is faithfully applied. The regular expression pattern also recognizes more legitimate variants such as pure refactoring [16] cycles during which the programmer does not add new functionality, but improves the design by typically revising the test code or the production code. Whereas the cycle trace of a faithful TDD programmer will contain a large number of short cycles, the traditional programmer who follows a waterfall-like process will have a cycle trace that contains a fewer number of long cycles.

The formalization assumes that unproductive or dead-end cycles always conclude with the restoration of a former stable state of the code. In a stable state, all tests must run 100% successfully. Once a stable state is achieved, the programmer verifies this condition, thereby delimiting an unproductive or dead-end cycle with a successful `TestExecution` block.

3.2 Architecture for Data Collection and Analysis

To recognize cycle traces, we need to collect fine-grained data regarding the programmer's coding and testing activities. For this purpose we chose Hackystat [5, 17], a lightweight tool available from the University of Hawaii's Collaborative Software Development Laboratory. Hackystat client sensors are available for several development environments including Eclipse [18]. Once the sensors are installed and configured on the programmer's computer, they work transparently in the background to collect the data. The Hackystat sensor periodically sends the locally cached data to a Hackystat server, where it is stored permanently and can be retrieved on demand in XML form.

To generate a representation of the cycle trace for a given time period, the client runs the analysis tool locally. The analysis tool downloads the associated logged data from the Hackystat server and generates an Excel spreadsheet containing a tabular representation of the client's cycle trace as well as the associated charts.

3.3 Mining Hackystat Data

Hackystat sensors collect multiple types of data from the client. We take advantage of the data types *Activity*, *UnitTest* and *FileMetric*. Hackystat logs changes to project artifacts in *Activity* data. Unit test executions are logged in *UnitTest* data along with the test results. *FileMetric* data contain static structural metrics on project artifacts.

Figure 1 shows how Hackystat data is aggregated to recognize programming cycles. The blocks that make up the cycles (`TestCode`, `ProductionCode` and `TestExecution`

Block) are composed of a set of related cycle entries, where each cycle entry has a duration (Active Time) and an associated project artifact (Active File). For TestCode and ProductionCode blocks, the project artifact is obtained by cross-referencing the test case names recorded in the Hackstatat *UnitTest* data with the file names recorded in the Hackstatat *Activity* data. The project artifacts (i.e., test classes) of a TestExecution block are obtained from *UnitTest* data alone. The duration of the cycle entry is estimated using Hackstatat timestamps. When no Hackstatat entries are logged for a project artifact for a certain period of time (e.g., two minutes), the excess time is recorded as “Idle Time,” which is excluded from “Active Time” to account for interruptions.

“T/P Ratio” tracks the amount of test code produced relative to the amount of production code. This metric is calculated using the *UnitTest* and *FileMetric* data. Since a cycle entry may affect the size of a project artifact, T/P Ratio is recomputed at the end of each cycle based on the timestamp of the last modification from the *FileMetric* data.

The number of tests attempted and the number of tests passed from *UnitTest* data together identify successful and failing test executions.

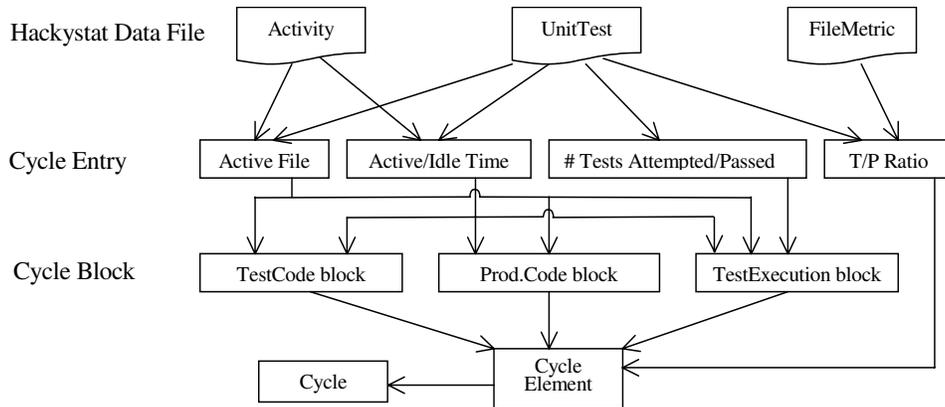


Fig. 1. Recognizing programming cycles using Hackstatat data types.

Aggregation of cycle entries into blocks proceeds in a bottom-up fashion. Since test executions delimit CycleElements, TestExecution blocks are formed first using *Activity* and *UnitTest* data types. If there is no *Activity* entry whose timestamp is between the timestamps of two *UnitTest* entries, then the two *UnitTest* entries are grouped into one Test-Execution block; otherwise, they belong to different TestExecution blocks. Once the TestExecution blocks are identified, remaining activities can be grouped into Production-Code and TestCode blocks by comparing their timestamps with the delimiting timestamps of the TestExecution blocks. Finally CycleElements and Cycles are constructed based on the sequencing of the blocks. The output of this procedure is illustrated in the next section.

4. Analysis of Cycle Traces

In this section, we present the output of our prototype analysis tool for Eclipse [18], called TestFirstGauge. We also show with several examples how the output can be interpreted to support personal process improvement, learning, process conformance, and project tracking. The data used in the examples are collected during various programming tasks from an experienced programmer who was learning TDD. Section 4.1 explains the tabular representation of a cycle trace generated by the tool. Section 4.2 illustrates the analysis of cycle time and T/P Ratio using two different charts. Finally, section 4.3 discusses testing effort analysis.

4.1 TDD Report

Figure 2 illustrates the cycle trace report generated by the TDD analysis tool.

Cycle	Activity	Active File	Tests		Active Time (sec)	Idle Time (sec)	T/P Ratio	
			Attempted	Passed				
19	Test Code	TestActionSet.java			17.77	0	0.37	
	Prod Code	ActionSet.java			13.65	120		
	JUnit Run	TestActionSet		2	1	0.14		
		TestTransition		4	4	0.02		
	Test Code	TestActionSet.java			1.57	0		
	JUnit Run	TestActionSet		2	2	0.08		
		TestTransition		4	4	0.04		
Cycle Total					33.27	120		
20	Test Code	TestActionSet.java			16.38	0	0.37	
	JUnit Run	TestActionSet	2	2	0.06			
...								
100	Prod Code	Controller.java			163.78	2640	0.32	
		ActionSet.java			0.00	0		
		TransBridge.java			94.75	61440		
	Test Code	TestController.java			34.46	960		
	JUnit Run	TestController		3	3	0.39		
		Cycle Total				293.38		65040

Fig. 2. Sample TDD report.

The first column shows the cycle number. The second column gives the type of the cycle entry, which depends on the block to which the cycle entry belongs. (The entries labeled “JUnit Run” belong to TestExecution blocks.) The third column lists the project artifacts associated with each cycle entry. For JUnit runs (TestExecution blocks), the numbers of tests attempted and passed are given in the next column. The column labeled “Active Time” gives the duration of the cycle entry (excluding idle time). Last column

provides the (cumulative) ratio of test code to production code. The total duration of each cycle is indicated in the row “Cycle Total”. Whereas Cycle 19 is a TDD cycle, Cycle 100 is a non-TDD cycle because it begins with a ProductionCode rather than a TestCode block.

4.2 Cycle Time and T/P Ratio Analysis

Figure 3 shows an example of the *cycle active time* chart. We can use this chart to support learning, assess process conformance and support project tracking.

Ideally, with faithful application of TDD, the chart should have short cycles of comparable length, representing a steady progress. Cycles from 40 to 100 are typical and conform to the ideal pattern. The spikes towards the beginning (long cycles) are possibly due to the initial TDD learning curve. The spikes towards the end correspond to integration-related tasks during which TDD was not applicable.

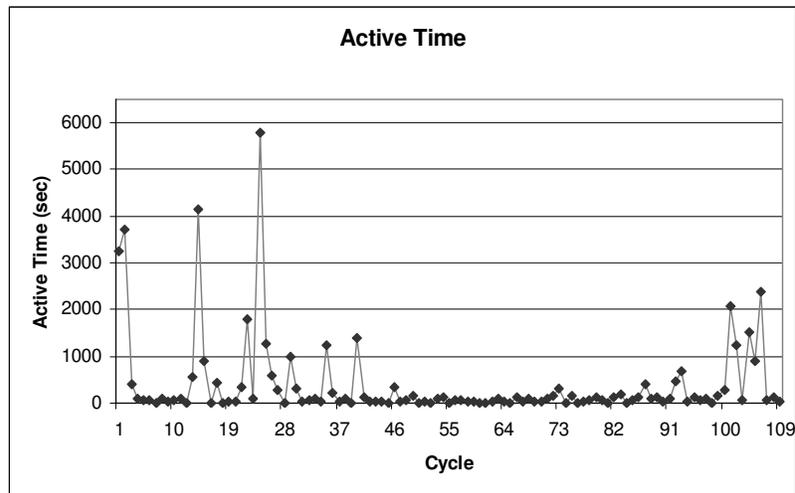


Fig. 3. Cycle Active Time.

With regard to project tracking, persistent long cycles could be indicative of design complexities, which make adding new functionality difficult. Such patterns can be used to identify opportunities for refactoring to improve the design.

Figure 4 depicts the *cycle pattern* associated with another programming task. The x-axis denotes cumulative cycle time measured in minutes. Long cycles now appear as large gaps between consecutive vertical bars, each of which marks the beginning of a new cycle. In the middle section, the programmer performs a series of large refactorings. To-

wards the end, a steadier pattern is gradually reached as evidenced by increasingly tightly spaced vertical bars. The height of each bar indicates the ratio of test code to production code (T/P Ratio) at the end of the associated cycle. We see that during the refactoring activity, the T/P Ratio increased: the programmer added more tests most likely to better support the design changes. Towards the end, the T/P Ratio gradually reverted back to its previous level.

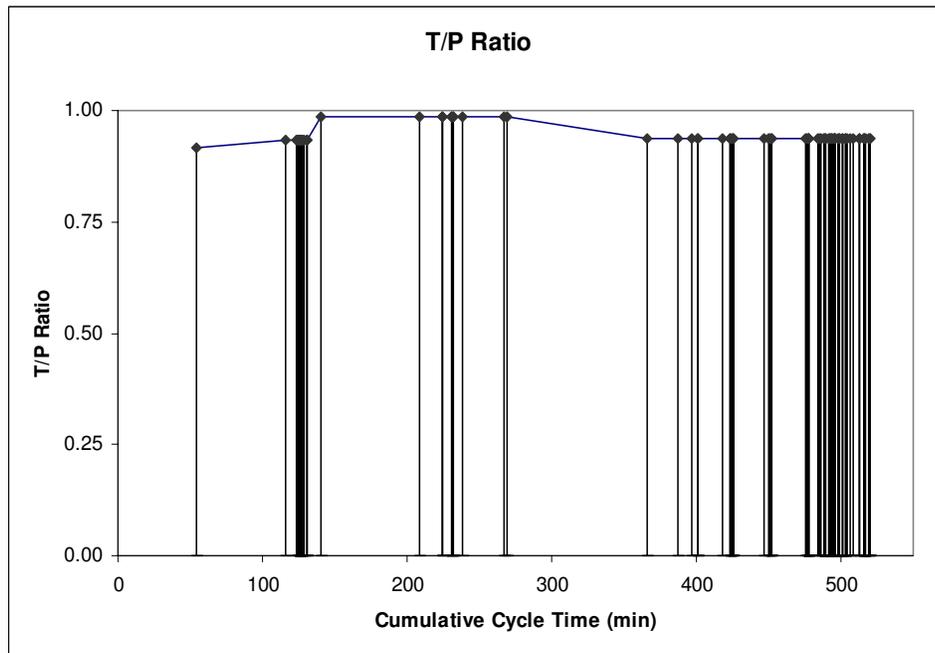


Fig. 4. Cycle Pattern with T/P Ratio.

4.3 Testing Effort Analysis

Analysis of testing effort is particularly useful for project tracking.

Figure 5 shows historical test code effort (bottom bars) relative to production code effort (top bars) as a function of cycle number. Test execution time is excluded from this analysis. Two explanations are possible for the absence of testing activity in the middle section of the chart. The first explanation is that the programmer could have neglected testing. In this case the chart can be used to look up the production code classes associated with the middle cycles in the TDD report to identify sections of the code as the focus

of subsequent coverage analysis. The second explanation is that the middle section corresponds to refactoring activities during which no tests were added or modified. Again the TDD report can be analyzed further to verify this hypothesis.

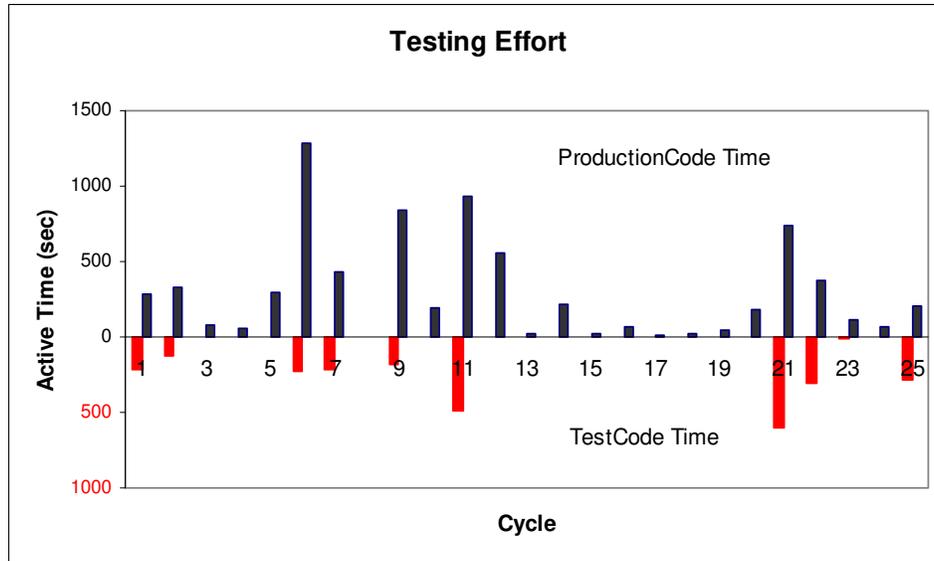


Fig. 5. Testing effort.

4.4 Cycle Time Distribution

Beck states [2] (page 83) that his JUnit usage (minutes between successive JUnit runs) has a particular U-shaped distribution. However, how often JUnit is run provides little information about how quickly a TDD programmer completes a programming task within a single cycle and how fine-grained the tasks are themselves. To gauge their speed and the granularity of the incremental process followed, TDD programmers should be more interested in the distribution of the duration of the programming cycles than the distribution of time between successive JUnit runs.

Figure 6 illustrates the cycle time distribution for a typical TDD session. The chart has been produced after the programmer has acquired experience with TDD. As expected with proper application of TDD, smaller cycles exhibit a higher frequency than larger cycles. As the mastery of TDD increases, the programmer should get better at task decomposition and follow an increasingly finer incremental process. Consequently, the head of the distribution should get fatter while the tail thins out.

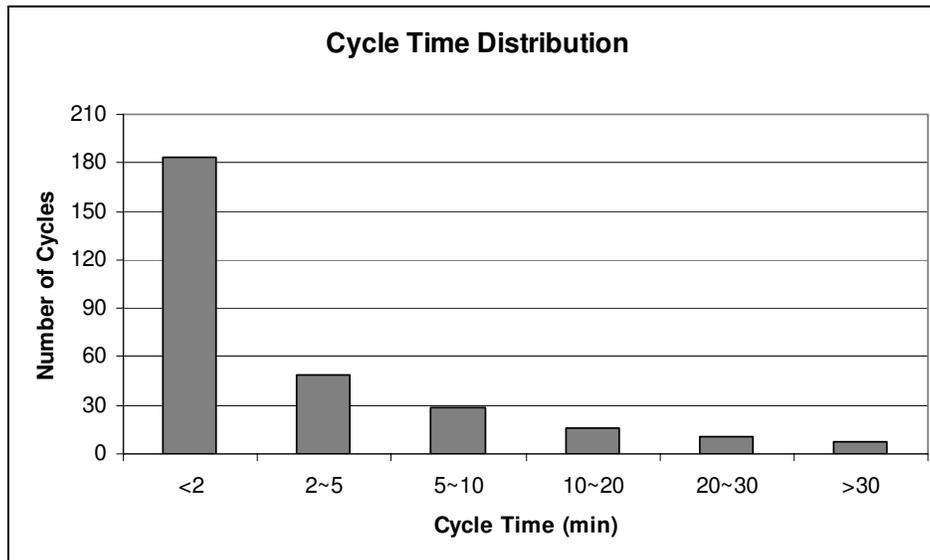


Fig. 6. Cycle time distribution.

5. Conclusions

Measurement supports process improvement not only at project and organizational levels, but also at a personal level. We presented an approach based on process measurement to support Test-Driven Development, an incremental coding technique that demands discipline. The goal of the approach is to:

- increase the mastery of TDD by providing concrete visual feedback to programmers regarding their past work patterns and rate of progress,
- facilitate teaching by allowing coaches to demonstrate target patterns and identify slippages,
- aid in project tracking by identifying sections of code that are candidates for closer scrutiny, and
- improve empirical evaluation by controlling process conformance.

At the centre of the approach is the concept of a programming cycle, which leads to the formalization of the process underlying TDD. A tool then extracts traces of such cycles from programmers' activity logs, and produces various time-series charts that are easy to

interpret. We provided examples of how to interpret a subset of these charts. The tool generates additional charts that were not discussed in this paper.

Our prototype tool works with Eclipse, JUnit, Microsoft Excel and Hackstat. The tool is freely available under GPL upon contacting the authors.

Although the espoused benefits of our TDD process measurement approach in research settings are well founded, its impact on education and personal process improvement is speculative at this point. Future efforts will focus on further improvements to the tool and on the evaluation of the approach in different settings. Work is already under way. The tool will be tested in an industrial case study of TDD and in future replications of the TDD experiment mentioned in [8]. Regarding additional analysis capabilities, we have made progress in two fronts: incorporation of test coverage information into cycle traces using a commercial tool and automatic recognition of refactoring cycles.

Acknowledgments

Maurizio Morisio's relentless obsession with process conformance and Marco Torchiano's arguments were instrumental in convincing the authors of the usefulness of an automatic measurement approach for TDD. Discussions with Philip Johnson led to the development of a mockup for the TestFirstGauge tool. Alain Desilets, Joel Martin, and Janice Singer gave valuable feedback on an early version of the tool. The IIT Software Engineering Group members provided comments to improve the readability of the paper.

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