

Pass-Driven Development (PDD): A Practical Alternative to Traditional TDD

Introduction

Test-Driven Development (TDD) is a well-established software practice where developers write tests *before* writing the actual code, following the classic **red-green-refactor** cycle ¹. In traditional TDD, one first writes a test that **fails** (red), then implements just enough code to make the test **pass** (green), and finally **refactors** the code for improvement ¹. This method has proven benefits in guiding design and ensuring a self-testing codebase. However, in real-world development, especially for evolving features or complex bug fixes, the conventional TDD workflow can feel counter-intuitive. It assumes the developer knows the final desired behavior upfront and can capture it in a failing test, which is not always the case in exploratory development.

Pass-Driven Development (PDD) is an alternative testing methodology, championed by Dinis Cruz, that "turns TDD upside down." Instead of starting with failing tests that break the build, PDD advocates writing tests that **pass** from the outset – reflecting the system's *current* behavior – and then evolving those tests alongside the code. By ensuring tests are always green (passing) in the continuous integration pipeline, this approach avoids the overhead of broken builds and provides a safety net as the codebase grows. In this white paper, we explore the motivations behind PDD, describe its workflow, and discuss the benefits it offers to development teams and technical leadership.

Limitations of Traditional TDD in Practice

While TDD's "**test-first**" principle is sound in theory, practitioners often encounter practical challenges when applying it to complex or evolving projects:

- **Uncertain End-State:** Writing a test to define functionality in advance assumes you *already* know how the feature should behave in every detail ². In reality, as a feature is developed, its design may change and new edge cases emerge. Developers frequently discover better ways to implement or test something *during* development, meaning an upfront test can become obsolete or misleading. TDD's upfront tests can constrain this natural evolution.
- **Fragile Initial Tests:** When a failing test is written for a behavior not yet implemented, it may only cover a very specific expected outcome. If there are preliminary issues or missing prerequisites leading up to that outcome, the test might fail for the wrong reason (e.g. failing earlier than intended), leaving the developer unsure of what went wrong ³. In complex workflows (multi-step interactions, integrated systems), an initial "red" test might not even reach the point of the intended assertion because something else breaks beforehand ⁴. This can complicate debugging and slow down development.
- **Breaking the Build:** A core tenet of modern software delivery is maintaining a green (healthy) build in CI. Traditional TDD temporarily violates this by introducing failing tests. Those tests cannot be committed to the main branch until the code catches up, effectively creating short-lived instability in the developer's environment. If the cycle is quick this is manageable, but if a

feature is complex or spans multiple steps, the failing test might persist longer. PDD advocates avoiding any knowingly failing tests in the code repository to keep the pipeline consistently green ⁵.

- **Perception of TDD as Overhead:** Some teams treat TDD as a tax – something that slows initial coding in exchange for future benefits. If misunderstood or done without proper tooling, writing tests first can feel cumbersome. Developers may “game” the process, writing superficial tests or skipping tests for speed, which defeats the purpose. Traditional TDD also doesn’t inherently guarantee high coverage; if developers only test the specific cases they imagined first, they might miss other paths. Over time, untested code can creep in, leading to brittle systems.

In summary, classic TDD can falter when the development path is exploratory and non-linear. The **evolutionary nature of quality software** – which often starts in a non-optimal state and improves through continuous refactoring – calls for a more flexible approach to testing. This is where Pass-Driven Development comes in.

What is Pass-Driven Development (PDD)?

Pass-Driven Development (PDD) is a testing and development workflow where tests are written to **pass from the start**, mirroring the system’s current behavior (even if that behavior is a *bug* or *incomplete feature*), and then incrementally updated as the code changes. The name implies that development is “driven” by keeping tests passing, rather than by initially failing tests. In essence, PDD flips the usual TDD cycle:

- Instead of writing a test expecting a *future* behavior (and seeing it fail until the code is written), you write a test expecting the *current* behavior of the code under development. This could mean if a feature isn’t implemented yet, the test might expect a default or empty result – whatever the system currently does. Similarly, if there’s a known bug, the test actually asserts the buggy behavior (so it **passes** because the bug is still present).
- You then write or modify the production code to add the new feature or fix the bug. As soon as the code’s behavior changes, the existing test will **fail** (because the system no longer behaves as it did when the test was written). In PDD, this failing test is a *good* sign – it indicates progress. The test has started to fail because the code moved beyond the old behavior ⁶.
- Next, you update the test’s expectations to match the new correct behavior, thereby making it pass again. This might involve changing assertions or adding new tests for expanded scenarios. Once updated, all tests are green again, and the improved code is fully covered by tests.

In this way, PDD maintains an **always-passing test suite** in the main branch or CI pipeline. At no point do you deliberately introduce a red test into version control; tests failing are a temporary phenomenon during local development when code changes outpace the tests. As soon as a test fails due to a code change, it’s either an indication of a regression (something broke unexpectedly) or simply that the test is still assuming the *old* behavior. In both cases, the developer immediately addresses it – by fixing the code or updating the test – before considering the work complete.

How PDD Differs from TDD: In traditional TDD, the cycle is often described as starting with the **test** (red) and then writing **code** to satisfy the test (green). In PDD, the cycle is effectively reversed in motivation: you start with code + test in a consistent state, then change code (causing red) and then

adjust tests back to green. The tests in PDD serve as a dynamic specification that evolves with the code rather than a fixed target that code must hit from the outset.

Crucially, PDD tests are not static *speculations* of how the code should eventually work – they are living checks that always reflect how the code **currently works** (including its flaws). As Dinis Cruz puts it, once a piece of behavior is merged into the main branch, it's effectively a "feature" of the system – even if it's a bug or missing capability – so tests should describe that reality until the code is changed ⁷. By doing so, the test suite becomes an executable record of the system's historical and current behavior. When you later fix a bug or enhance a feature, the tests will change accordingly, documenting that evolution.

PDD Workflow in Action

Let's break down the typical PDD workflow for two common scenarios: **fixing a bug** and **developing a new feature**. In both cases, the guiding rule is that tests start by describing what *currently happens*, not what isn't implemented yet.

Bug Fixes: "Bug-First" Tests

When a bug is discovered, the PDD approach is to **write a test that reproduces the bug's scenario and passes because the bug exists**. This is sometimes called a "*bug test*" or "*passing bug test*". It's counter-intuitive in a standard mindset – normally one might write a test expecting the correct behavior and see it fail. Instead, PDD acknowledges the current flawed behavior as the expected outcome (temporarily) in the test. For example, if a function erroneously returns `null` due to a bug, the test would assert that it *does* return `null` for the bug-triggering input, thereby passing with the bug present.

This approach has several immediate benefits:

- It verifies that the test harness is capable of reaching and replicating the bug **before** attempting a fix. In writing a passing bug test, you prove that you can programmatically trigger the faulty behavior and observe it ⁸. (It's not uncommon to discover that setting up the right conditions for a bug is tricky – writing the test first exposes any limitations in your testing framework or data factories that need to be improved to simulate the scenario ⁹.)
- It captures the existence of the bug in the continuous integration pipeline without breaking the build. The bug is now recorded as a test case in the suite (so it won't be forgotten), but because it's written to pass given the current code, it **doesn't fail the CI** or annoy other developers ⁵. In other words, the test suite remains green and can be run continuously, even though it contains a known bug scenario. This is a key difference: the team can merge this test immediately, documenting the defect in code form, whereas in TDD they might have to hold a failing test privately until the fix is ready.
- It provides an immediate signal when the bug is resolved. Once you proceed to **fix the bug in code**, that previously passing test will **start failing**, alerting you that the behavior it was expecting (the bug) is no longer present ⁶ ¹⁰. This is a moment of progress: a failing test here means the software has moved beyond the old defect. At this point, you modify the test to assert the *correct* behavior (the bug's absence or the proper outcome), converting the bug test into a permanent **regression test** ¹¹. Now the test will pass on the fixed code, and it will continue to pass in the future unless someone accidentally re-introduces that bug – in which case it fails and catches the regression.

The sequence for a bug under PDD can be summarized as: *find bug -> write passing test for bug -> commit test (CI stays green) -> fix code -> test fails (bug gone) -> update test to expected behavior -> tests green again*. This creates a tight feedback loop. It also **preserves history**: the version control diffs of the test show clearly what behavior changed when the bug was fixed, acting as documentation of the fix ¹². In fact, reviewing the changes to these tests can be a powerful code review technique for QA and other developers to understand exactly what was wrong and how it was resolved ¹¹.

New Features: Evolving Tests with Code

For new functionality, PDD encourages an **incremental approach** similar in spirit to TDD, but with the twist that tests are always in sync with the current implementation at each step:

1. **Write an Initial Test for a New Feature:** Begin by writing a test that *calls or exercises the not-yet-implemented feature* in its simplest form. Initially, the feature might be just a stub or minimal implementation. The test should reflect that. For example, if you are adding a new API endpoint, you might first instantiate the endpoint (or call the function) and assert that it returns an empty response or a “not implemented” status – whatever the current placeholder behavior is. This test will pass because the placeholder code intentionally matches the test’s expectation (even if it’s just a dummy value or doing nothing).
2. **Implement the Next Increment of the Feature:** Add code to start fulfilling the feature’s requirements. As soon as this new code changes the behavior beyond what the initial test expects, that test will fail locally. This is the equivalent of entering a “red” phase, except the trigger is the code change rather than a pre-written test. For instance, now the API endpoint returns some real data where the test was expecting an empty response – the test fails.
3. **Adjust or Add Tests to Match the New Behavior:** Update the test’s assertions to expect the new output or behavior. If the feature grew in scope (e.g., it now handles more cases), add new test cases covering those. At this point, all tests should pass again (green). Each test added or changed is capturing *exactly what the code does at this stage*.
4. **Repeat in Small Steps:** Continue this cycle of adding more functionality and then immediately adjusting/writing tests to keep the suite passing. With each iteration, you are effectively *using tests to drive development*, but always anchoring tests to reality. The test suite evolves in tandem with the codebase, gradually expanding what it covers. At any given commit, the tests act as an honest specification of the code’s capabilities and limitations at that moment in time.

By the time the feature is fully implemented, you will have a suite of thorough tests covering it, and at no point did you have to disable CI or maintain a long-lived failing test. If during development you decide to refactor or change the design (a common scenario), you won’t have a backlog of hypothetical tests written upfront that now need major rewrites. Instead, your tests have only ever described what you actually built, so refactoring means updating tests in parallel with code – a more straightforward alignment.

Constant Feedback and Coverage

In PDD, whenever you **make a code change**, you expect to see some test either fail or at least exercise that change. Dinis Cruz emphasizes that if you manage to change the code without any test failing, **that’s a red flag** – it implies you have modified something that no test is covering **【speaker】**. Under PDD, such situations are rare because the development process itself yields high coverage. Developers

following this workflow tend to write tests for virtually every method or logic branch as they work on it. Over time, this leads to extremely high code coverage numbers (often **90%+** on new code) achieved *organically*, rather than via after-the-fact testing efforts ¹³. In fact, Cruz reports routinely hitting ~95% coverage "without even trying," with the remaining gaps usually being code paths that are unreachable or trivial (or, if not, they highlight dead code that should be removed or scenarios that need additional tests) ¹⁴. In PDD, reaching near-100% coverage is not the ultimate goal but rather "**base camp**" – a starting point that ensures every part of the system is exercised by tests ¹⁵. From that base, developers can confidently refactor and extend functionality, knowing that any deviation in behavior will trigger a test failure as immediate feedback.

It's worth noting that to make this rapid feedback loop feasible, certain tools and practices are very helpful. Teams often use **real-time test execution** monitors (like Wallaby.js, NCrunch, or continuous testing in IDEs) so that as soon as you save code, the relevant tests run instantly ¹⁶. This way, the developer sees the red/green signal in seconds after a change. Maintaining a suite of fast, deterministic tests (avoiding heavy integration tests except when needed) is important so that the edit-test cycle remains quick. PDD doesn't forbid integration or end-to-end tests – in fact it encourages writing tests at multiple layers (from unit to integration to end-to-end) for a given feature or bug ¹⁷ – but those tests too should be automated and run on demand. The faster and more isolated the tests, the smoother the PDD experience.

Benefits of Pass-Driven Development

PDD yields numerous benefits that address some of the shortcomings of traditional TDD and testing-after approaches. These advantages resonate with senior developers looking for productivity and code quality, as well as technical leaders concerned with maintainability and risk management:

- **Bugs are Caught and Documented Early:** By writing a test as soon as a bug is discovered (and making it part of the suite), you ensure the bug is not only slated for fixing but also that it will never silently resurface. The bug scenarios become part of the regression test suite *immediately*. This practice **captures known bugs in the CI pipeline** without disrupting it ¹⁸. Each bug test is effectively a to-do item that flips to a failure when the time comes to fix it, providing instant confirmation that the fix worked ¹⁰.
- **No Fear of Changing Code:** Because tests blanket almost every behavior in the system, developers can refactor or extend the code with confidence. If something breaks, a test will alert them right away. Conversely, if no test fails, one can be reasonably certain that the change didn't alter any specified behavior. This addresses a common issue in teams: *fear of modifying code* due to unknown side effects. With PDD, the team develops a deep trust in the test suite as a **safety net**, catching any attempt to reintroduce old bugs or create new ones ¹⁹. This encourages more aggressive refactoring and continuous improvement of the codebase (leading to cleaner, more modular code over time, rather than band-aid fixes).
- **High Coverage and Thorough Testing by Design:** PDD naturally drives coverage towards 100%. Since you write tests for each change and ensure any new line of code has a test expecting something from it, you end up exercising all logic paths. Importantly, coverage here isn't just hitting lines for the sake of a metric – it's derived from meaningful tests that were written to facilitate development. The result is a **comprehensive regression suite** that can catch a wide range of issues. When Cruz says *100% code coverage is not the destination... it is "base camp"* ¹⁵, the implication is that once you have that level of coverage, you can climb further in quality – such as testing multiple data variations, refactoring with ease, and leveraging generative tools to

suggest even more test cases. The tests are a strong shield against both functional regressions and certain security issues, since any code path exploited by an attacker would likely have been executed in a test during development.

- **Faster Debugging and Understanding:** A subtle but powerful benefit of writing tests that mirror current behavior is that it forces the developer to *understand and articulate what the code is doing*. When preparing a passing bug test, for instance, one often adds assertions and prints out values to really see the state leading to the bug ²⁰. This process can reveal unexpected truths about the system. Those assertions serve as documentation of the bug's nature and the system's behavior. PDD tests thus capture the **"history of the developer's understanding of the problem"** ²¹. New team members or even future you can read these tests and grasp what the edge-case was and how the system responded. The test suite becomes an always-up-to-date living documentation of the software. As noted, it's **knowledge preservation in code form** ²² – every edge case or quirk that was discovered and handled is recorded in an executable example.
- **Improved Collaboration Between Teams:** When tests are abundant and written for every change, they become a common language between developers, QA, and even management. In an ideal PDD scenario, **tests can be reviewed and discussed as the primary artifact** when validating a change. QA engineers, instead of solely doing manual testing, can look at the new tests added for a feature or bug fix to understand what was done and even suggest additional cases. Some organizations practicing this encourage QA and security team members to contribute tests or at least **demand tests for each fix** as proof and documentation ²³ ²⁴. Managers and architects can get involved by reading tests to verify that certain conditions are handled. This test-centric collaboration means issues are caught earlier (during code review of tests) and there's less reliance on ad-hoc spreadsheets or documents to explain what the software should do – the tests are the spec. PDD, in a sense, blurs the line between specification and verification: the tests *are* specifications that are continually verified.
- **Continuous Integration Friendly:** Since PDD mandates that tests in the main branch always pass, it aligns well with continuous integration and continuous delivery (CI/CD) practices. The build is never knowingly broken by a test that was written ahead of code. This avoids the scenario of having to skip or quarantine tests in CI because a feature isn't done – a practice that can sometimes happen with TDD when a long-running feature spans multiple commits. With PDD, at any given time, the software in the repository is in a deployable state with all tests green (barring unexpected failures), and yet you still have tests covering even incomplete or buggy parts (because those tests were written to pass until the next change). This leads to a very **stable pipeline** where test failures truly mean something went wrong, not that someone is in the middle of implementing a test-first story.
- **Adaptable to Change and New Knowledge:** As noted, high-quality software **evolves**. PDD embraces this by allowing tests to evolve too without shame. It avoids the rigidity of writing an elaborate test upfront for a design that might change. If during development you realize a different module should handle a task (thus the original test is pointing at the wrong place), you can shift the tests to the new module along with the code. There is no wasted effort—every test that was written was at one point reflecting truth and aiding development, even if it gets refactored later. This adaptability means developers are less likely to delete or ignore tests; instead they refactor tests with the same care as code. In fact, the presence of the test suite makes large-scale refactors possible with confidence, because you can move functionality around and quickly see if any expected behavior changed inadvertently.

In sum, PDD leads to **better code quality**, not just through more testing but through better design enabled by constant feedback. Teams practicing it report shipping with far greater confidence. It's common to achieve near zero critical bugs in production because so many scenarios have been exercised in lower environments. Furthermore, the approach tends to produce code that is easier to maintain – because to test everything, you naturally push the design toward more modular, injectable components (otherwise it'd be too hard to set up tests). Developers also enjoy a smoother workflow: they can focus on one small change at a time, immediately see the impact via a failing test, and then solidify it. This tight loop can even become addictive, as each green run gives assurance and each red informs the next task.

Practical Considerations for Adopting PDD

Adopting Pass-Driven Development requires some shifts in mindset and tooling. Here are a few practical considerations for teams and leaders considering this approach:

- **Invest in Testing Infrastructure:** PDD relies on having a robust automated testing environment. Teams may need to build out **helper methods and test data factories** to easily create the state needed for complex tests. In fact, as you practice PDD, you will likely accumulate a rich library of utilities for setting up test scenarios (e.g., functions to create valid objects, seed databases with data, simulate user inputs, etc.). This upfront investment pays off immensely as it becomes trivial to write a new test for any layer of the application. Also, ensure you have or adopt tools for *fast test execution* (in-memory databases for integration tests, stubs for external services when appropriate, etc.) so that running the whole suite is efficient. Slow tests can discourage the tight feedback loop.
- **Minimize Heavy Mocking:** Traditional unit testing often encourages extensive use of mocks to isolate units. PDD, by contrast, leans towards testing real interactions as much as possible (especially since it often writes tests at multiple layers for the same issue). Dinis Cruz notes that he rarely uses mocking; instead he prefers to create real objects and environment state needed for the test, because that gives more confidence in actual behavior and catches more issues in integration **【speaker】**. This doesn't mean no mocks at all, but the philosophy is to use them sparingly and only to simulate truly external dependencies or to force rare error conditions. The richer your in-memory test environment, the less you need to simulate. Teams might consider adopting in-memory versions of components or lightweight containers to run near-production scenarios in tests.
- **Cultural Shift to “Test-as-Code”:** With PDD, tests are not an afterthought or a separate concern – they are part and parcel of development. Teams should treat test code with the same respect as production code. This includes code-reviewing tests, refactoring test code for readability and reusability, and expecting developers of all seniority levels to write tests as part of their task (not leaving it to QA or a separate team). Management should encourage senior engineers or architects to engage with the test suite – for example, when a critical bug is fixed, a tech lead might review the new tests added for that fix to ensure they cover the issue adequately. In many organizations, the best developers eventually move to leadership and code less; PDD provides a channel for them to still contribute by writing or reviewing tests, which keeps their technical context sharp and helps mentor others ²⁵ ²⁶.
- **Continuous Integration Setup:** Since the goal is always-passing tests, make sure your CI is set to run the full test suite on each commit or pull request. PDD will likely increase the number of tests significantly, but if they are well-structured and parallelizable, the suite can still run quickly

(especially unit tests). Use CI to enforce that any introduced failing test is a regression that must be fixed or a test expectation updated. Over time, a PDD-driven project can actually enjoy very stable CI runs, because flaky tests or half-implemented tests aren't as common – nobody merges a test that's known to fail. When occasionally a test does fail on CI, it's taken seriously and investigated immediately, because it's not an expected part of a dev cycle but an anomaly.

- **Onboarding and Training:** New team members might not be familiar with this style of testing. It's important to mentor them, perhaps by pairing them with an experienced PDD practitioner for a while. Once they get used to it, many developers find it improves their productivity and the quality of their code. Emphasize the mindset: *"Never make a code change without a test that covers it"*. In practice, this might mean writing a quick test before changing something, or immediately after changing, but never letting code drift untested for long. Encourage writing tests even for scenarios that seem "obvious" – many production bugs come from those edge cases nobody tried. PDD turns that into a habit: try it in a test as you code it.
- **Gradual Adoption:** For a team new to this, it might be useful to start with the bug-fix workflow (since it's a clear win to have bug regression tests). Next time a production issue arises, guide the team to write a passing bug test, then fix the bug and update the test. Seeing that process in action can win converts. For new feature development, perhaps start in areas of the codebase where requirements are fuzzy or likely to change – PDD will show its value there by accommodating the changes. Over time, as the test suite grows and developers see how few bugs escape to production and how fearless refactoring becomes, the PDD approach can become second nature.

Conclusion

Pass-Driven Development is a compelling refinement of the TDD philosophy, born out of real-world needs for flexibility, high coverage, and maintainable code. By insisting that tests always reflect the current reality of the software – and leveraging test failures as a signal of change rather than just unmet expectations – PDD keeps the feedback loop tight and the development process efficient. For senior developers, it offers a way to truly *embrace change*: you can iteratively build and reshape your code with the reassurance that your ever-growing suite of tests has your back. For technical leaders, PDD leads to **higher-quality outputs** and a culture of engineering excellence: features are delivered with comprehensive tests from day one, bugs get codified into permanent regression checks, and the team shares a common, executable understanding of the system's behavior.

In practice, teams applying PDD have reported near-zero critical bugs in production, faster feature delivery due to reduced manual testing overhead, and the courage to refactor large parts of systems to keep them clean (since the tests immediately highlight any divergence). It aligns perfectly with agile and DevOps principles – small iterative changes with rapid feedback – and maximizes the value of your test suite as both a verification tool and living documentation.

While PDD might sound like just "writing a lot of tests," it is more nuanced: it's about *when* and *how* you write them. The key shift is psychological – viewing tests not as a final exam for your code, but as a partner in development, a running commentary on your code's journey from conception to maturity. By adopting Pass-Driven Development, teams can significantly improve their productivity and software quality in tandem. It is an approach well worth considering for those who have felt the limitations of traditional TDD or have struggled to maintain high quality in rapidly changing codebases.

In summary, **PDD keeps your development process always in the green**, not by avoiding tests, but by embracing them at every step. The result is code that is robust, well-understood, and delivered with confidence. As Dinis Cruz noted, *"this isn't just testing; it's knowledge preservation in code form"* ²² – an asset that pays dividends as your software and team scale.

Sources:

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¹ Test Driven Development

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