



I Take It (Almost) All Back

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In the first edition of this book, I wrote, “I approach the topic of ad hoc testing (also called ad lib testing) as I would approach a South Texas rattlesnake. I worry that if I say anything good about ad hoc testing, some poor reader will assume that I am giving my blessing to ‘guided exploratory testing’ as a primary technique. Just so there’s no confusion: in my opinion, testing without written test cases and documented expected results has a lot in common with the Hispanic party tradition of letting blindfolded children pummel a hanging piñata with a stick to get at the candy inside. Would you bet your job and the quality of your company’s product on this methodology?”

I was too harsh and too sweeping in my comments. I have seen people use exploratory testing successfully. I have, since I wrote that uncharitable paragraph, had a chance to work with James Bach at his Workshop on Heuristic and Exploratory Testing (WHET). He’s convinced me that the approach, applied intelligently in the right context, is one that has many benefits.

However, it is possible to do it wrong. I’ve seen it plenty of times, usually due to poor skill on the test team or poor guidance from the manager. I saw one client adopt this as primary technique without the proper skill level in the test team. They couldn’t keep track of what was going on with the system they were testing, so they wrote bug reports that consisted solely of single sentences such as, “Blue screen of death observed,” and other less-than-profound observations.

I’ve seen and heard of people going wrong on the other extreme, too. Sometimes considerable effort is expended on heavily scripted test cases that are then a constant burden to update and use. The client I mentioned in Chapter 1 who called test plans and test cases “shelfware” had seen one too many examples of this approach.

There are rattlesnakes all across the continuum, but I’d guess there are more at the extremes. While I have seen a few organizations use approaches at the extremes of the continuum successfully, and I understand that context plays a huge role in this decision, I would caution you that I have seen test organizations founder on the rocks of sloppy exploratory testing, and have also seen test teams squander precious resources on intricate documents seldom referenced after they were written.