

# Towards Agile Security Assurance

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## ABSTRACT

Agile development methodologies are gaining acceptance in software industry. If they are to be used for constructing security-critical solutions, what about assurance? This paper examines how well conventional security assurance suites agile methodologies for developing software-intensive systems. It classifies security assurance methods and techniques with regards to their clash with agile development. For those in conflict, ways of alleviating it are suggested.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.5 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Security and protection. D.2.4 [Software Engineering]: Software/program verification. K.6.1 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and people management - *Lifecycle*. K.6.3 [Software Engineering]: Software management - *software process*.

## General Terms

Management, Documentation, Security.

## Keywords

Agile methods, security, security assurance, security engineering, software development process

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For 20 years, the developers of software intensive systems have tried very hard to apply the technical-rational approach to project management, with a sequential (or waterfall) lifecycle, including rigorous up-front planning, up-front design, and a constant care to monitor and drive the project to conform to the plan. On one hand this approach has served very well certain activities of software development. By having available early on the planning and design artifacts that can be handed out to experts for close examination has facilitated the task of certification of the system to the conformity of external standards, and apparently made the life of the acquirer of soft-

ware-intensive system easier. A discipline that took advantage of this is for example security assurance, but this applies equally to certification for safety in avionics, or medical instrumentation.

But the reality is sadly different. As demonstrated by the “Chaos” report from the Standish group [1], the actual success rate of software project is very low, with less than 50% success, and much of it is to be blamed on the management practices. Software design is more akin to research than to construction or manufacturing, and many of the management paradigms we have tried to use were simply not adapted.

In reaction, this state of affairs spawned the emergence of a new breed of approaches to managing software projects, known collectively as “Agile methods”. These methods proceed iteratively; they rely on gradual emergence of the design and the requirements, and put more emphasis on direct person-to-person communication than heavy written documentation. They exploit the “soft” nature of software to modify it, shape it gradually like play-do, and place and exploit many feedback loops in the process. Rather than “plan-build-implement”, they proceed by “speculate-collaborate-learn” [2].

These methods start to show some successes in industry and they seem indeed more suitable for software development. Their application to the security engineering [3, 30] as well as for safety engineering [29, 32] has been considered. Unfortunately, they also go against the accepted practices in system certification, in independent validation and verification, and in software acquisition, where the practices appear to go totally contrary to agile approaches. Can and how agility and (particularly security) assurance adopt each other?

In this paper, we focus on security assurance, and examine how its practices do fit or not in the context of agile methods. Specifically, we classify conventional security assurance methods and techniques into four groups depending on the degree of their clash with agile development practices. It turns out that roughly half of these methods and techniques either match the practices or could potentially support agility through automation. For the other half, we suggest ways of alleviating the conflict. Note that in this paper we are not casting any judgment on the quality or suitability of agile process: we can only acknowledge that they are there to stay, and they provide a new baseline for software process evolution. Neither is our intent to explicitly challenge this or that aspect of the traditional approaches to security assurance.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives necessary background on security assurance and introduces some fundamental characteristics of agile methods. Section 3 identifies the areas where agile methods seem to conflict with the normal way of dealing with security assurance. Finally, section 4 offers some avenues to compromise: how to combine

the various practices in ways that do not completely remove but alleviate the pain points. Section 5 draws conclusions.

## 2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

This section provides background material on the subjects of the paper, the methods and techniques of the conventional security assurance and the agile development, and reviews related work.

### 2.1 Security Assurance

Security assurance provides confidence in the security-related properties and functionalities, as well as the operation and administration procedures, of a developed solution. Conventional assurance methods (more detailed description of which is provided in Appendix 1) can be roughly grouped into the use of best practices in a form of (un)official guidelines, design and architectural principles, use of appropriate tools and technologies, dynamic testing and static analysis, and, most importantly, internal and third-party review, evaluation, and vulnerability testing. While being the keys to achieving confidence that a solution meets its security requirements, third party's objectivity (and therefore independence) and expertise (and therefore high costs) result in a side-effect, documentation-focused development, which is in conflict with agile development methods. Before going in more detail about the conflicting points, let us provide background on agile development.

### 2.2 Agile methods

Over the last 8 years or so, new families of software engineering methods have emerged, under different labels: Agile methods, which gelled around the agile manifesto [4]. In these families of methods we find Crystal [5], Adaptive Development [2], Feature-driven Development, Scrum, Lean Software development, and the most famous one, because of its provocative name, Extreme programming (XP). These processes are quite different from each other, each has its special central features, and appeal to different types of projects, but they share a certain number of common characteristics.

They are all fundamentally iterative. They do not replicate the more traditional sequence: requirement, design, implementation, test, or rather they do this sequence again and again, exploiting the fact that software is extremely soft, modifiable, and has no manufacturing cost associated.

Their iterative nature allows agile methods to be much more accommodating to changes on several fronts:

- emergence of requirements ("customer on site") and, to match it,
- emergence of the design (refactoring, no big up-front design (BUFD)), which goes together with less focus on "big up-front planning," and
- early and gradual construction of a test suite (test-driven development)

Also, in reaction to previous attempts to make the software development process a rigid, rigorous construction or administrative endeavour, all Agile methods exhibit a great aversion for "software bureaucracy", and favour direct communication between participants rather than reliance on written artifacts. This is very visible in practices such as 'pair programming', 'customer on site', or the daily 'scrum' (where all team members rapidly gather for a stand-up 10 minute meeting to assess

progress). Direct communication is also the limiting factor when the size of team increases, as beyond 12 or 15 some intermediate media must be defined. As a result, and somewhat unfortunately, agile organizations tend to rely a lot on tacit knowledge, which make the transfer of software to other organization more difficult.

Finally, many agile methods put much more emphasis on the person, which is not just a cogwheel in an anonymous software producing machine.

We will revisit these aspects of agile software development methods: iterative lifecycle, emergence, direct communication and tacit knowledge, in the context of security engineering to examine how they play in favour or against the current practices in this domain.

### 2.3 Related works

Other researchers have examined ways to reconcile the approaches. Abrams had looked at fitting security engineering in an evolutionary acquisition process [30].

A working group of the National Cyber Security Summit produced recommendations on processes for developing more secure software, but failed to take into account specificities of iterative or agile processes [31]. More importantly, the report authors ignore the fact that software development companies just cannot afford and have little legal and/or economic incentives to employ the processes and methods the report is advocating. The work reported in this paper looks into the ways of making the engineering of secure software more affordable, which is also recommended by Spafford in [34, 35].

Wärynen et al. started to investigate the issue of adapting XP to support security engineering [28], which is the opposite to the question we considered in this paper, that is, how to adapt security assurance to fit agile software development. Nevertheless, their conclusions could be helpful for making security assurance and agile development meet half-way:

1. Include a security engineer in the development team for assessing security risks, proposing security related user stories, and for performing "real-time" security reviews of the system design and code through pair-programming.
2. Document the security engineer's pair programming activities to build an assurance argument.
3. Document the security architecture for the sake of assurance argument.
4. Complement pair programming with static verification and automatic policy enforcement.

## 3. PAIN POINTS

When examining the normal practices of security assurance in the context of the agile methods we just briefly characterized, we run into a number of difficulties, conflicts, or "pain points": 1) reliance on 3rd party reviews, 2) reliance on 3rd party evaluation, and 3) reliance on 3rd party testing. By "third party," we mean specialists coming "after the show", expecting to inspect, analyze, validate, test, and then certify a more or less finished product: complete requirements, complete design, and finished implementation, almost ready-to-ship.

So the normal practice of security assurance clashes with agile development on three elements:

1. Direct communication and tacit knowledge -- the specialists have not been on site, so they must rely on extensive documentation.
2. An iterative lifecycle, as the 3rd party would (in theory) have been involved at each iteration
3. Refactoring, and other major changes in architecture
4. The philosophy driving testing

### 3.1 Direct communication and tacit knowledge

It is good practice to keep the developers and the security specialists “at arm’s length”, so that they do not pollute each other ideas; this is a fundamental practice in the assurance business. Security assurance must be completely neutral and objective, and therefore its practitioners should not be involved too closely with the developers, except during their information gathering sessions. Conversely, the developers

often acquire “tunnel vision” and become quite blind to security flaws, focusing on the functional development.

### 3.2 Iterative lifecycle

The involvement of a third party is expensive, and it puts a lag in the development, for example, from a few days to a few months, depending on the project size and complexity. While the security assurance efforts proceed, you could continue the development, but you are going at risks, and defeating some of the benefits of the inspection.

### 3.3 Refactoring

Refactoring leads to the redesign, from the bottom up, often to eliminate redundancies from the code. This leads to another assignment of functionality to modules, which may not play well with security constraints. Unfortunately, refactorings is one of the cornerstones of agile development, and it is more and more supported by tools and methods [33].

Table 1 – Impedance mismatches

Security assurance method or technique		Match (2)	Independent (8)	(semi)-automated (4)	Mis-match (12)
Requirements	Guidelines		X		
	Specification analysis				X
	Review				X
Design	Application of specific architectural approaches		X		
	Use of secure design principles		X		
	Formal validation				X
	Informal validation				X
	Internal review	X			
	External review				X
Implementation	Informal correspondence analysis				X
	Requirements testing			X	
	Informal validation				X
	Formal validation				X
	Security testing			X	
	Vulnerability and penetration testing			X	
	Test depth analysis				X
	Security static analysis			X	
	High-level programming languages and tools		X		
	Adherence to implementation standards		X		
	Use of version control and change tracking		X		
	Change authorization				X
	Integration procedures		X		
	Use of product generation tools		X		
	Internal review	X			
	External review				X
	Security evaluation				X

### 3.4 Philosophy of testing

The focus of testing is very different between the functionality testing prepared early in agile development and performed routinely throughout development and system testing for security which proceeds on totally different premises; it focuses on the least exercised parts of the system (as opposed to general functional testing). The focus is on pathological aspects, boundary values, and least used aspects.

Complete security testing also involves a test depth analysis, to understand how thorough the tests are. To do this, developers need to document all the tests, which forces early documentation of the requirement and the design, and this brings us again further away from the user stories/emergence of requirements, and closer to BUFD.

We can note that the clashes we have identified between the agile methods philosophy and security assurance may not be specific to security engineering only. The certification processes for safety-critical systems, in particular those required in the medical instrumentation area (21 CFR part 11, or ISO 14791), or the aerospace industry (ARINC DO178B) lead to similar concerns, for the same reasons: independence of the inspection process, relying therefore on written documentation, and cost of doing inspection iteratively (each iteration defeating partially what had been assessed previously).

## 4. RECONCILING THE OPPOSITE: MATCHING ASSURANCE WITH AGILITY

What can be done to try to reconcile, or accommodate the methods of security assurance with the practices of agile development? The assurance methods, if applied naively, would create deterring delays between critically short iterations as well as prohibitively inflate the development budgets. They would also turn away the developers, the majority of which is averse to trading development for documentation. Ideally, adopted security assurance methods and techniques would allow evolving the confidence in the system in regards to security in same iterative, incremental, and emerging fashion, and through same direct communication and tacit knowledge practices as agile development does. In a real world, where there are neither magic nor silver bullets, a compromise that would decrease time and budget overheads (due to security assurance employed at every iteration) and yet provide “good enough” assurance, is necessary. In this section we present some strategies toward a compromise.

### 4.1 Classifying Security Assurance Methods

It is important to note that not all assurance methods and techniques are in conflict with agile development. We found it useful for the purpose of this discussion to distinguish the following groups:

**Natural match.** Pair programming naturally facilitates internal design and code review, as well as motivates developers to follow coding standards [6, 7], including standards for writing “secure code”. In addition, in pair programming, developers receive immediate feedback from their peers, which could very well be on the principles and guidelines of secure design (listed in Section 1.2). As Wärynen et al. [28] suggest, the practice of pair programming could be further enhanced by involving a security engineer who can use this opportunity for reviewing the design and the code.

**Independent of the development methodology.** Some security assurance methods, techniques, and tools can (and have to) be applied throughout the lifecycle independently of the development methodology in use.

Consider version control and change tracking, as an example. Thanks to the rapid evolution of the tools, version control and change tracking could now be found in the toolbox of any active programmer, and even small one-person projects (see [www.sourceforge.net](http://www.sourceforge.net) for numerous examples) exercise some form of change control.

**Can be (semi-)automated.** Some methods and techniques can be (semi-)automated so that they can be applied during each iteration without creating significant budgetary or time overheads for an agile project. Examples are static analysis of the source code with regards to security-related defensive coding standards, system testing for known vulnerabilities, and penetration testing.

**Mismatch.** Approximately half of the conventional assurance methods and techniques directly clash with the principles and practices of agile development. Most of these techniques create mismatch due to their reliance on extensive documentation served as a subject of analysis, verification, and validation activities. The most salient one is security evaluation, such as Common Criteria [8].

We summarize the classification in Table 1.

### 4.2 Proposed strategies

Since the first two groups of security assurance methods and techniques, ‘matching’ and ‘independent’, can evidently be integrated with agile development, this section focuses on the other two groups. Let us first consider the group of methods and techniques that can be (semi-)automated.

#### 4.2.1 For semi-automatable methods

For this group, tool support can and should be boosted. As with unit testing, which became pervasive after the corresponding libraries and tools (JUnit, CPPUNIT), had matured, automation of security static analysis and dynamic testing, vulnerability and penetration testing, as well as requirements testing could lead to the wide acceptance of these methods by agile developers. The goal for the automation efforts should be in reducing these methods’ overhead to so little that they could be applied as often as unit tests are. Automation, however, addresses half of the problem for this group of security assurance methods.

No matter how much automation is achieved, with security dynamic testing for example, the development of application-specific tests requires security expertise and security-oriented testing philosophy, which cannot be expected from an average developer. On the other hand, the same is true for application domains. For instance, in order for a complex banking application to be well designed and implemented, the developers are expected to have extensive knowledge in the domain of finance.

A possible way to close this gap is through codifying in the tools themselves the knowledge necessary for applying assurance methods and techniques from this group. Fault injection [9] and automatic test generation [10, 11] techniques, as an example, could be integrated into the security dynamic testing tools. Tests could also be automatically generated from the code to test for boundary values, and to cover least exercised parts or execution paths in a system. Whereas with automat-

able assurance methods the way out of the tunnel is visible, the fourth group is the most challenging.

#### 4.2.2 For mismatching methods

Security assurance methods in this group rely on either extensive documentation of the system, or the involvement of external security or formal verification experts, or both. As a result the methods are the most difficult to reconcile with agile development due to their daunting budgetary and time overheads, as well as the focus on documentation. For instance, in a recent study reported by Vetterling et al. [12] it took 3 months for 18 developers to complete one iteration of developing a relatively small application (20 use cases) conformable to level 2 (i.e., structurally tested) of Common Criteria, which did not even include time for third party evaluation. What can be done to adopt these methods to agile development with its short iterations?

We envision two possibilities for matching assurance methods from the fourth group with agility. The simplest to suggest and the most difficult to implement is the invention of new agile-friendly security assurance methods in place ones from this group. This direction seems to be a promising area for future research. The other possibility is less spectacular but more practical.

Taking into account the observation that in agile development the biggest questions need to be answered as early as possible, we suggest to apply the assurance methods from this group at least twice in the development lifecycle: once after first several iterations in a project, and once closer to the end, i.e., several iterations before the system is expected to be shipped. The latter application point is clearly necessary in order to obtain security assurance in the final product. The former enables early confidence in the security properties of the main design and architectural decisions, and reduces the possibility of the “big bang” toward the end of the project. Time and resources permitting, additional applications of the methods from this group in between these two is desirable but can be omitted. The main drawback of this compromise, however, is that this will still lead to too much agile-adverse documentation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper makes an initial step toward integrating security assurance methods and techniques into the agile development practices. It classifies conventional methods and techniques used for security assurance in regards to their acceptability for agile development. It also proposes ways to accommodate the conflicting techniques.

Instead of trying to bend the development process in support for security assurance [12, 13, 28], we look at the problem from the opposite end: can we imagine ways of satisfying the demands of security assurance without making the development documentation-focused, and totally integrated in the agile practices and artifacts (user stories, code, testing practices), complemented by security-specific analysis tools that would provide assistance and support for the detection of flaws, and the production of test suites specific to security?

At this point, we can only propose a compromise between the two camps. Is it good enough to alleviate the conflict discussed in Section 3? What needs to be done to get to the point where tools integrated in development environments would incrementally and continuously check, test, and analyze the various artifacts—code, design, requirements—in regards

to security, pretty much the way today tools like CruiseControl<sup>1</sup> support continuous configuration management, regression testing, and integration? Is it possible to incorporate seamless generation of the evidence necessary for external review, testing, and evaluation (such as CC [8]) into agile practices? These are our questions for the future work.

As noted by an anonymous reviewer, maybe the impedance mismatch that we face is a blessing in disguise; it could cause us to challenge the “good old heavyweight assurance processes” that have been enshrined in many standards and acquisition policies, and may lead to their replacement by other approaches and processes that are “good enough” and more suitable for rapidly developed and deployed commercial software.

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## Appendix 1: Conventional Security Assurance

In simple words, security assurance is confidence that a system (or, generally speaking, a solution) meets its security requirements. Mostly of interest to the solution's users and owners, this confidence is based on specific evidence collected and evaluated through the application of assurance techniques. The techniques consist of a) guidelines for developing security requirements, doing design, implementation, and operation/administration of the solution in question, b) methods for gathering assurance-related evidence, and c) evaluating the evidence. While some techniques, e.g., internal and external reviews, are employed across the whole development and operational processes, others could roughly be grouped according to the life cycle stages in which they are applied.

### Requirements Assurance

Requirements assurance methods are concerned with justifying that the security requirements specification is complete, consistent, and technically sound. This type of assurance is commonly achieved through following requirements development guidelines and (informally) analyzing the specification. For example, ITSEC [14], a security evaluation criteria used by some European countries, defines suitability analysis that aids in justifying that the security functional requirements are sufficient to mitigate the threats to the system.

### Design Assurance

Particular architectural and design principles combined with guidelines on the content of design specification, as well as informal and formal techniques for justifying that the design meets the requirements, are employed for design security assurance. Specifically, security assurance methodologies call for modularity, layering, and security kernel [15], among others, as architectural approaches that help to analyze and

evaluate system design in the context of security. Among recommended design principles are the following (adopted from [16]):

- *least privilege*. A subject should be given only those privileges that it needs to complete its task.
- *fail-safe defaults*. Unless a subject is given explicit access to an object, it should be denied access to that object. This principle is a foundation of closed-world security policies.
- *economy of mechanism*. Security mechanisms should be as simple as possible.
- *complete mediation*. All accesses to objects should be checked to ensure that they are allowed.
- *open design*. Security of a mechanism should not depend on the secrecy of its design or implementation.
- *separation of privilege*. System should not grant permission based on a single condition.
- *least common mechanism*. The mechanisms used to access resources should not be shared to minimize the possibility for attackers to exchange information via the shared mechanisms.
- *psychological acceptability*. Security mechanisms should not make the resource more difficult to access than if the security mechanisms were not present.

To aid with assuring a design, the corresponding documentation is recommended to specify (informally, semi-formally, or formally) security functions that enforce security in the system, external interfaces through which protected resources and services are accessed, and internal design that defines an implementation of the external interfaces. The primary purpose of the design security specification is to support the validation of the design against the requirements.

Aside from formal techniques (e.g., HDM [17]) based on proof and model checkers and employed almost exclusively in high-assurance efforts, the following informal methods are used for design validation:

- *requirements tracing* – identifying and documenting specific security requirements that are met by (parts of) the design specification,
- *informal correspondence* – showing and documenting that external functional specifications, internal design specifications, and implementation code are consistent with each other, and
- *informal arguments* – helping to go beyond tracing design into *requirements* and to get confidence in how well the requirements are met by the design.

## Implementation Assurance

In addition to internal and external reviews, requirements testing and informal correspondence analysis, as well as formal proof techniques, implementation assurance is achieved by the following means:

a) *Security testing*, similarly to the testing of other system properties and functionalities, can be functional or structural (a.k.a., black and white box testing correspondently), as well

as unit and system (a.k.a., end-to-end) testing. Whereas testing of application logic targets common cases and most used functions of a system, successful security testing requires more attention to the least used aspects of a system, pathological cases, and boundary values of the input data.

b) Special type of security testing is focused on finding known vulnerabilities in a solution. Although catching some vulnerabilities can and commonly is automated [18-22], others, such as those caused by errors in the design or improper use of security libraries and services [23, 24], require manual efforts of experts. Even experts, however, can fail to test a security-critical element or execution path of a solution. Confidence in the completeness of security testing is gained through *test depth analysis*, which provides an argument that testing at all levels is sufficient. Such analysis relies upon (and produces more of) test documentation, which is also used for internal and external reviews.

c) *High-level programming languages and tools* designed with security in mind and when used properly, can help gain confidence in an implementation. Run-time environments, JVM and .NET for instance, have been designed to help developers in avoiding such common for systems implemented in vanilla C and C++ problems as buffer overflows, string manipulation issues, memory handling problems. Although systems running in these virtual machines are not automatically free from vulnerabilities [25, 26], they are commonly perceived to help with increasing implementation assurance.

d) The *enforcement of implementation standards* helps not only with gaining confidence in the general quality of an implementation but with security assurance as well. As a case in point, defensive coding standards that target potential vulnerabilities are starting to appear in the “trenches” [23].

e) Another common approach to increasing security assurance calls for the use of powerful *configuration management tools* with the capabilities of version control and change tracking, automated integration procedures, product generation, and authorization of changes to a system. The latter capability encourages the discrimination of developers on the basis of which parts of the implementation can be modified by which developer(s). The discrimination is in the conflict with the philosophy of some widely used agile methodologies, such as eXtreme Programming (XP) [27], which “preaches” collective ownership of the code where every developer should feel free to refactor any part of the system to improve or simplify it.

The major source of confidence in the security of high-assurance systems, as well as the main objective of many official assurance efforts is security evaluation. The dominating security evaluation framework, Common Criteria (CC) [8] describes security related functionality to be included into a system, and assurance requirements on its development. The requirements are organized into evaluation assurance levels (EAL). The highest level, EAL7, requires formal representation of the high-level design and formal proofs of correspondence with the security requirements. CC certification is legally required for military and some government contracts. The CC, however, does not give any guidance on how to fulfill them during the development process [12].