Tests as Maintainable Assets Via Auto-generated Spies: A case study involving the Scala collections library's Iterator trait

Konstantin Läufer  
*Loyola University Chicago*

John O’Sullivan  
*Loyola University Chicago*, josullivan1@luc.edu

George K. Thiruvathukal  
*Loyola University Chicago*, gkt@cs.luc.edu

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Tests as Maintainable Assets Via Auto-generated Spies

A case study involving the Scala collections library’s Iterator trait

Konstantin Läufer
Loyola University Chicago
laufer@cs.luc.edu

John O’Sullivan
Loyola University Chicago
josullivan@cs.luc.edu

George K. Thiruvathukal
Loyola University Chicago and
Argonne National Laboratory
gkt@cs.luc.edu, gkt@anl.gov

Abstract
In testing stateful abstractions, it is often necessary to record interactions, such as method invocations, and express assertions over these interactions. Following the Test Spy design pattern, we can reify such interactions programatically through additional mutable state. Alternatively, a mocking framework, such as Mockito, can automatically generate test spies that allow us to record the interactions and express our expectations in a declarative domain-specific language. According to our study of the test code for Scala’s Iterator trait, the latter approach can lead to a significant reduction of test code complexity in terms of metrics such as code size (in some cases over 70% smaller), cyclomatic complexity, and amount of additional mutable state required. In this paper, we argue that the resulting test code is not only more maintainable, readable, and intentional, but also a better stylistic match for the Scala community than manually implemented, explicitly stateful test spies.

ACM Reference Format:

1 Introduction
In our university-level programming languages course [11], the scanLeft method (similar to foldLeft with intermediate results) in the Scala collections library is an important part of our overall pedagogy and the subject of many examples, including running averages and other forms of sliding analysis on unbounded streams, e.g., dynamic word clouds, stock market analysis, etc. In general, such prefix scans are useful and efficient building blocks for interactive, event-based, and other stream processing systems.

In this—and other—courses, we also emphasize the notion of tests as assets. The software development community increasingly views automated tests as longer-term, maintainable assets along with the production code itself [9, 13], and a body of work on design patterns for automated testing has emerged [14]. In particular, a Mock Object replaces an object the system-under-test (SUT) depends on, is usually preconfigured to provide certain behaviors the SUT expects, and dynamically verifies the expected interactions coming from the SUT. By contrast, a Test Spy also takes the place of a dependency of the SUT but behaves like the original dependency while recording the SUT’s indirect outputs, i.e., interactions with the dependency in terms of method invocation frequency and arguments, for later verification. Both of these are subpatterns of Test Double.

In the context of our course, we noticed and reported a seven-year-old bug in the scanLeft method of the Iterator trait, which provides some lazy stateful behaviors that are challenging to test. Indeed, the original test for Iterator . scanLeft does not fully test the correctness of this method under certain conditions. This led us to study the Scala collections library’s source code, where we noticed that the test suite includes several instances of manually implemented, explicitly stateful test spies. While the corrected scanLeft implementation was successful in terms of clarity, conciseness, and idiomatic style, we found it difficult to understand the code and the actual cases being tested.

In this paper, we look for opportunities to use automatically generated test spies as a systematic way to improve the tests for scanLeft and other Iterator methods and bring them in line with the notion of tests as assets. While this serves as the underlying case study for this paper, the technique we describe is of general value as a programming pearl. More broadly, it brings existing tools and techniques to the Scala community in the hope that they will be useful. We have organized the rest of the paper as follows:

- a detailed explanation of the case study based on the scala.collection.Iterator trait
- an overview of auto-generated test spies and how they can replace manually implemented test dependencies
object CumAvgFunctional extends App {
val lines = scala.io.Source.stdin.getLines
val values = lines.map(_.toDouble)
val results = values.scanLeft((0, 0.0)) {
  case ((count, sum), value) =>
    (count + 1, sum + value)
}
results.drop(1).foreach {
  case (count, sum) =>
    println(count + ": " + (sum / count))
}
}

Figure 1. The imperative version of the cumulative running average filter is a simple, monolithic while loop. The functional version shown here is a pipeline of modular, separately testable stages, arguably making it more readable and maintainable. Both run in linear time and constant space.

- a side-by-side comparison of the official scanLeft test vs. an equivalent test with an auto-generated spy
- a comparison of complexity metrics, including code size and cyclomatic complexity (a quantitative measure of the number of linearly independent paths through a program’s source code) [12], before and after refactoring several tests from manually-implemented to auto-generated test spies, and
- a summary of human and technical challenges that must be addressed for the proposed approach to be used more widely by Scala developers.

The novelty of our work is an initial exploration to identify, understand, and improve test assets, focused on a “by hand” analysis of the test code complexity. Although our efforts have been focused on the Scala library itself, owing to the critical role Scala’s core library plays in all Scala development, the methods we describe are of general value and also play a role in our own development efforts. We are not aware of other work focused specifically on understanding test code complexity and using the resulting metrics to improve test assets. We believe our work has important implications in education and professional Scala development by training the next generation of Scala developers how to write effective, comprehensible, and maintainable tests.

2 Case study: Iterator.scanLeft

The scala.collection.Iterator trait did not have a scanLeft method until it was requested in Scala Issue 4054 [4] and implemented in January 2011 as shown in Figure 3.

This version, however, causes the example from Figure 1 to behave incorrectly as seen in Figure 2b: Instead of printing the first updated average right after reading the first value, it prints this only after reading the second value; it then prints each subsequent update delayed by one input value, and the final update only after EOF. The reason is that the iterator returned by scanLeft does not return the current item until after the (premature) call to self.next() on line 600 in Figure 3 returns. The included test does not catch this bug because it focuses on the correctness of the resulting items, irrespective of the interactions with the original iterator.

We reported this bug as Scala Issue 10709 [6] in February 2018, after attempting to use scanLeft in the context of our spring 2018 Scala-based programming languages course [11]. The Scala team promptly fixed this issue as of Scala 2.12.5, by reimplementing the method using a flat four-state machine, replaced as of Scala 2.13.x [7] with an arguably more elegant and straightforward implementation based on the State pattern [3].

The corresponding test, shown in Figure 4a, uses a test spy in the form of a custom iterator with additional state to test for incremental correctness along with the “right amount of laziness.”

Discussion There are several possible factors contributing to the fact that this bug remained unreported for so long:

- Iterator.scanLeft might be rarely used, or rarely used incrementally as described above.
- Developers might have resorted to a workaround but not taken the time to report the actual bug.
- State-dependent behaviors are challenging to comprehend, document, implement, and test.

Furthermore, there is considerable essential complexity [2] to a stateful behavior such as scanLeft: it returns a decorator [3] around the receiver, after which one is no longer allowed to interact directly with the receiver, while subsequent interactions with the decorator have side effects on the original receiver, such as reading lines from input. This complexity carries over to the spy-based test in terms of the dynamic interactions shown in Figure 5.

We conjecture that tests that rely on manually implemented spies typically suffer from two additional shortcomings: (1) accidental complexity that affects maintainability, and (2) unhelpful failure messages. We will now explore how automatically generated spies can help address both issues.

3 Auto-generated test spies can help

As an alternative to manually implementing test doubles (see Section 1) to represent the SUT’s dependencies, mocking frameworks support the automatic generation of mock objects, usually based on their type. Some mocking frameworks, such as Mockito [5], additionally support the automatic generation of test spies. We chose Mockito because of its maturity, support for idiomatic Scala syntax [8], and unique support for spying on final and anonymous classes.

Concretely, as shown in Figure 4b, we can use Mockito to wrap a test spy around a simple iterator instance, invoke scanLeft, and then interact with the iterator resulting from this invocation; these interactions still correspond to Figure 5. During these interactions, we can test not only the (overall) correctness of the values of the resulting iterator, but also the
Figure 2. Correct (left) and incorrect (right) sample runs of the cumulative running average filters. In the incorrect case, the updated average goes up to the previous instead of the current input value. (We prefix input lines with `>`.)

```scala
def scanLeft[B](z: B)(op: (B, A) => B): Iterator[B] = new Iterator[B] {
  var hasNext = true
  var elem = z
  def next() = if (hasNext) {
    val res = elem
    if (self.hasNext) elem = op(elem, self.next())
    else hasNext = false
    res
  } else Iterator.empty.next()}
```

Figure 3. Original version of `scanLeft` and associated correctness test. In this implementation, the resulting iterator does not return the current item until after the (premature) call to `self.next()` on line 600 returns (shown in boldface above). The test does not catch this bug because it focuses on the overall correctness of the sequence of items returned.

```scala
object Test {
  def main(args: Array[String]) {
    val it = Iterator.from(1).map(n => n * n).scanLeft(0)(_+_)
    assert(it.next == 0)
    assert(it.next == 1)
    assert(it.next == 5)
    // etc.
  }
}
```

Table 1. Comparison of test code complexity metrics (number of mutable objects, LOC, and Cyclomatic Complexity counted manually) before/after refactoring from manually implemented to auto-generated test spies. (Mut_a = 0 for all test methods.) Even when there is no or little reduction in the metrics, there is usually a gain in readability and clarity of intent. This table includes most affected tests in `IteratorTest` and `HashMapTest`; there may be other applicable tests elsewhere in the codebase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method under test</th>
<th>Test method</th>
<th>Mut_b</th>
<th>LOC_b</th>
<th>LOC_a</th>
<th>LOC_A</th>
<th>CC_b</th>
<th>CC_A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iterator.sliding</td>
<td>IteratorTest.groupedIteratorShouldNotAskForUnneededElement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-60%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iterator.++</td>
<td>IteratorTest.noExcessiveHasNextInJoinIterator</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-47%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iterator.stream</td>
<td>IteratorTest.toStreamIsSufficientlyLazy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-22%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iterator.scanLeft</td>
<td>IteratorTest.&quot;scan is lazy enough&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-73%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HashMap.getOrElseUpdate</td>
<td>HashMapTest.getOrElseUpdate_evalOnce</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion By eliminating the need for custom iterator implementations with mutable state, auto-generated test spies allow the programmer to focus on the functional correctness of the SUT. This promotes the view of test code as readable, comprehensible, teachable, and maintainable assets, which has the potential to work its way back into the API documentation. If more developers feel encouraged to write tests, this might foster a test-driven mindset in the community.
// Test def `scan is lazy enough`(): Unit = {
  val results = ListBuffer.empty[Int]
  val it = new AbstractIterator[Int] {
    var cur = 1 ; val max = 3
    override def hasNext = {
      results += -cur ; cur < max }
    override def next () = {
      val res = cur ; results += -res
      cur += 1 ; res }
  }
  val xy = it.scanLeft(10)((sum, x) => {
    results += -(sum + x) ; sum + x
  })
  val scan = ListBuffer.empty[Int]
  for (i <- xy) { scan += i ; results += i }
  sameTestElements(List(10,11,13), scan)
  sameTestElements(List(10,-1,-1,-11,-1,11,-2,-2,-13,-13,-3), results)
}

java.lang.AssertionError: expected:<List(10, -1, -1, -11, 11, -2, -2, -13, 13, -3)> but was:<ListBuffer(-1, -1, -11, 10, -2, -2, -13, ...)> at org.junit.Assert.fail(Assert.java:88)
  at AssertUtil.assertEquals(...) at IteratorTest.scan().next() wasCalled i. times
  } }

4 Conclusions and Future Work

We have shown that Mockito’s auto-generated test spies eliminate much accidental complexity from certain state-based tests. We plan to conduct a similar investigation of Scala view, Stream, and the LazyList class added in 2.13.x.

More broadly, we hope to use repository mining to identify other Scala projects that can benefit from making tests more immutable and declarative, understand the effect of these refactorings on test code complexity/quality [1] and process metrics [15], and investigate the possibility of tool support.

Finally, it turns out that a test coverage tool would not have indicated the problem with the original test for Iterator .scanLeft shown in Figure 3. Common metrics, such as statement and branch coverage, remain unchanged (after compensating for a finite vs. indefinite iterator as SUT). Further study might reveal whether suitable existing test coverage metrics are effective for these complex stateful behaviors. Nevertheless, taming test code complexity using test spies can be an effective strategy for improving the comprehension and maintainability of test cases.

Table 1 shows other test methods that can benefit from this approach; those typically exhibit code smells such as var or mutable state other than the stateful SUT, e.g., a buffer. Because Test Spy is a common subpattern of Test Double [14], we expect the technique of spying on a stateful SUT to be beneficial in similar scenarios to Figure 5, even when the result of the method-under-test (MUT) depends on the SUT in more general ways than decorating/wrapping the SUT. For instance, we have used generated test spies for unit testing a view component in a Scala-based Android app [10].
References


