

# Did Sesame Street Impact the Adoption of Agile Methodology?

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## History of Sesame Street

The first episode of Sesame Street aired in November 1969. It was aimed at preschoolers and was based on any number of research studies. 'It wanted to be an educational program due to the common thought 'at the time' that television programs harmed the development of children.'<sup>1</sup>

Television was generally a half hour or hour long program in a 'serial' format. Watch the show this week, and tune in next week for a continuation of the storyline; this required the watcher to maintain a memory of the previous week's episode. This was difficult for children to do. The alternative was a television program with 'skits' or short stories, but these were generally dull and bland, even those whose purpose was comedy and not specifically aimed at children.

Then, along came Sesame Street. It used commercial-like 12–90 second 'shorts' that employed repetition to reinforce the targeted concepts throughout the episode of the program. Sesame Street used catchy music with contemporary beats, humour, short bursts of action and strong images with bright colours. They used a mix of real people and cute, colourful puppets.

Each episode of Sesame Street was built like a magazine to appeal to the perceived short attention span of children. This format allowed the use of a mix of styles, story speed and multiple characters. With this format, children's interest and attention was able to be sustained throughout the episode. Each episode was discreet and there was no requirement to remember the previous program. Learn about the letter 'R', count with The Count to 6, see Big Bird talking with Buffy, watch the Cookie Monster make a mess gobbling a bunch of cookies and see Bert and Ernie iron out a dispute; all delivered with fun music and awesome colour. This format allowed the program to be very fluid.

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A child watching Sesame Street saw quickly executed, dynamic, bright, episodic 'shorts' that repeated a targeted concept in a fun, engaging way. Cute, brightly coloured puppet personalities interacted with real humans in a simplistic, honest way. All those interactions had a goal that was attained very quickly and, more often than not, successfully.

## Agile Methodology

Agile software development is a development method that is based on team work that can quickly adapt to changes, works through iterations and produces a useable product in a short time-boxed period of time.

### “communication trumps documentation”

Agile development methods<sup>2</sup> evolved in the mid 1990's as an answer to the overly cumbersome, and time consuming, Waterfall method and the Agile Manifesto<sup>3</sup> was introduced in 2001. One could argue that Agile did not so much 'evolve' in the 1990's but was 'adopted' as the climate was right for it. Since then, the Agile Movement has changed the landscape of software engineering and commercial software product development.

The Agile Manifesto is based on twelve principles:

1. Customer satisfaction by rapid delivery of useful software
2. Welcome changing requirements, even late in development
3. Working software is delivered frequently (weeks rather than months)
4. Working software is the principal measure of progress
5. Sustainable development, able to maintain a constant pace
6. Close, daily cooperation between business people and developers
7. Face-to-face conversation is the best form of communication (co-location)

8. Projects are built around motivated individuals, who should be trusted
9. Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design
10. Simplicity—the art of maximizing the amount of work not done—is essential
11. Self-organizing teams
12. Regular adaptation to changing circumstances

Agile methods use 'Pair programming', collocation and communication as a means to build team work, collaboration and adaptability throughout the project.

Agile methods break tasks into small pieces with minimal planning; communication trumps documentation and the huge planning effort at the start of a project is removed. Iterations are short, typically lasting from one to four weeks.

Each iteration involves a multi-functional team that may include planning, requirements analysis, design, coding, unit and acceptance testing. Each iteration produces a working product. The project team may need to make rapid adaptations to changes in requirements, design, etc.

In Agile, there is usually a prominent status of process of the product readily available to the team. Daily stand-ups are common attributes of Agile. Team members report what they did, what they plan to do and any roadblocks.

### Sesame Street and Agile Relationship

Sesame Street was aimed at preschoolers and first aired in late 1969. Thus, those watching Sesame Street would have birth dates later than 1964, assuming that 'preschooler' in 1969

meant those with an attained age younger than 5 years. Those same individuals would be 30 or younger in the year 1995, about the time that Agile was being re-introduced.

Given the number of Information Technology (IT) practitioners, one can make the inference that a number of those preschoolers, now in the post-secondary world, took Computer Science of some variety and joined the IT cadre sometime after 1984. They were then exposed to the Waterfall methodology that was in wide use at the time. Let's take a look at the principles of Agile and how Sesame Street programming conditioned its young viewers to readily embrace and develop Agile Methods.

## **“Sesame Street did set in motion the environment that allowed Agile to flourish”**

The 'rapid delivery' of Agile perfectly mimics those quick, rapidly executed 'shorts' from Sesame Street. Get it done with a positive outcome and then onto the next story or sprint.

The 'shorts' from Sesame Street were plentiful during the program; many little stories; a lot to watch and be engaged with. The frequent delivery of workable code, the result of an iteration, is the same as those multiple shorts in the one hour Sesame Street program. During Sesame Street, there were a mix of slow stories and fast stories. Some iterations are 2 weeks; some are 6.

Nothing in Sesame Street was set in a logical sequence. The Count followed by Oscar followed by Buffy followed by Big Bird. The next episode could follow a completely different sequence.

Agile welcomes mutable requirements requiring adaption to changing circumstances. Watching and adapting to the ever-changing format and stories of Sesame Street conditioned those watching to embrace the ever changing Agile landscape.

Sesame Street built trust in the characters. It showed and taught co-operation and communication. Bert and Ernie regularly had misunderstandings and conflicts. These were always resolved with good humour. It is arguable that these concepts increased, in those young minds, the ability to communicate with others, work in a team and inspired the self confidence that is needed to make Agile successful.

Sesame Street did not generate the 'spark' of the Agile Methodology. Indeed, although not called Agile, this methodology was first talked about in 1957 4/6 and was the subject of multiple lectures in the mid to late 1970's 5/6; but it did not take flight until those preschoolers brought up on Sesame Street embraced it. Sesame Street did set in motion the environment that allowed Agile to flourish.

Sesame Street was indeed an educational program for preschoolers, but it also paved the way for adoption of Agile Principles by instilling the ability to adapt to multiple 'stories' in a fast paced time frame, the ability to communicate, the knowledge of conflict resolution and the ability to feel comfortable with delivering an

'end' (product) in a short time frame and quickly move on to the next task.

Sesame Street and the future impact on Information Technology was neither a goal nor

even a thought when the program was developed. What impacts might current childhood entertainment have on the future?

### **Ella Hoyt CTFL, CAPM**

1 <http://www.canada.com/news/sesame-street/index.html>

2 Early implementations of agile methods include Rational Unified Process (1994), Scrum (1995), Crystal Clear, Extreme Programming (1996), Adaptive Software Development, Feature Driven Development (1997), and Dynamic Systems Development Method (DSDM) (1995). These are now collectively referred to as agile methodologies, after the Agile Manifesto was published in 2001. [5]

3 <http://www.agilealliance.org/the-alliance/the-agile-manifesto/>

4 [dcsms.davidconsultinggroup.com](http://dcsms.davidconsultinggroup.com) - [What Is Agile: Values and Principles - DCG-SMS - David](#)

5 <http://www.antiessays.com/free-essays/449120.html>

6 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agile\\_software\\_development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agile_software_development)



#### **About The Author**

Ella is a Test Consultant with over 18 years of experience in Information Communication Technology. She has worked in many industry verticals and helped deliver projects in Oil and Gas, Health Care, Telecommunications and Gaming. Her focus on testing has been as test lead on a number of projects, managing the test effort throughout the testing life cycle and delivering quality products.