Is more planning the only way to reduce uncertainty in new ideas? A Stars2Road workshop experience report…

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Long time ago, I worked with a team of programmers in Australia where we had 5 programmers that were coding happily all day long. A project manager handed us requirements and clarified them every day in a daily sync meeting. Since we were a new team and lots of us just came fresh from university, we were a young, excited and happy hacker team.

We were the "classic" programmers those days, focusing only on programming and leaving all other activities to others.

6 months in the project we realized a bottleneck in this system. The project manager was basically the major communication channel between us and the client stakeholders. Every time we needed something like clarification we needed to go through the project manager. This came up in one of our discussions (not called "retrospectives" yet) and we talked about fixing it.

It was at that time that we realized that our job is not to write code. Although we were programmers and our main activity is to code software and tests, we realized we needed to propose solutions to the problems the stakeholders gave us. It's more than just translating requirements to software.

> *We realized that a team's job is to solve a business problem or making the business better.*

But… there were 2 major constraints that I faced at that time:

1. No hands on experience: Being an avid internet user I started searching for idea gathering techniques, workshop formats and other tools to brainstorm ideas. I researched the theory but had no hands on experience.
2. Small solution space: Since at that time we worked in a certain environment (being Microsoft technologies, ASP.NET, and alike) the solution space was already quite small and almost every time we got a problem we had a clear Microsoft solution in our head.

One option is a trap.
Two options is a dilemma.
Three options is a choice.

The questions that came up in my head were:

- How can we open up the solution space and find disruptive ideas and products?
- How can we identify business problems earlier?
- How can we brainstorm effectively ideas?
- How can we build the right product?

Back to the year 2015…last week…

I attended the 1-day Stars2Road workshop from Markus Flückiger, a Zühlke colleague of mine. Being a LeanStartup fan and follower from the early days I was unsure what to expect in that workshop and my initial thought was: “It’s a brainstorming tool”.
I was wrong. It is much more.

A spider meeting begins

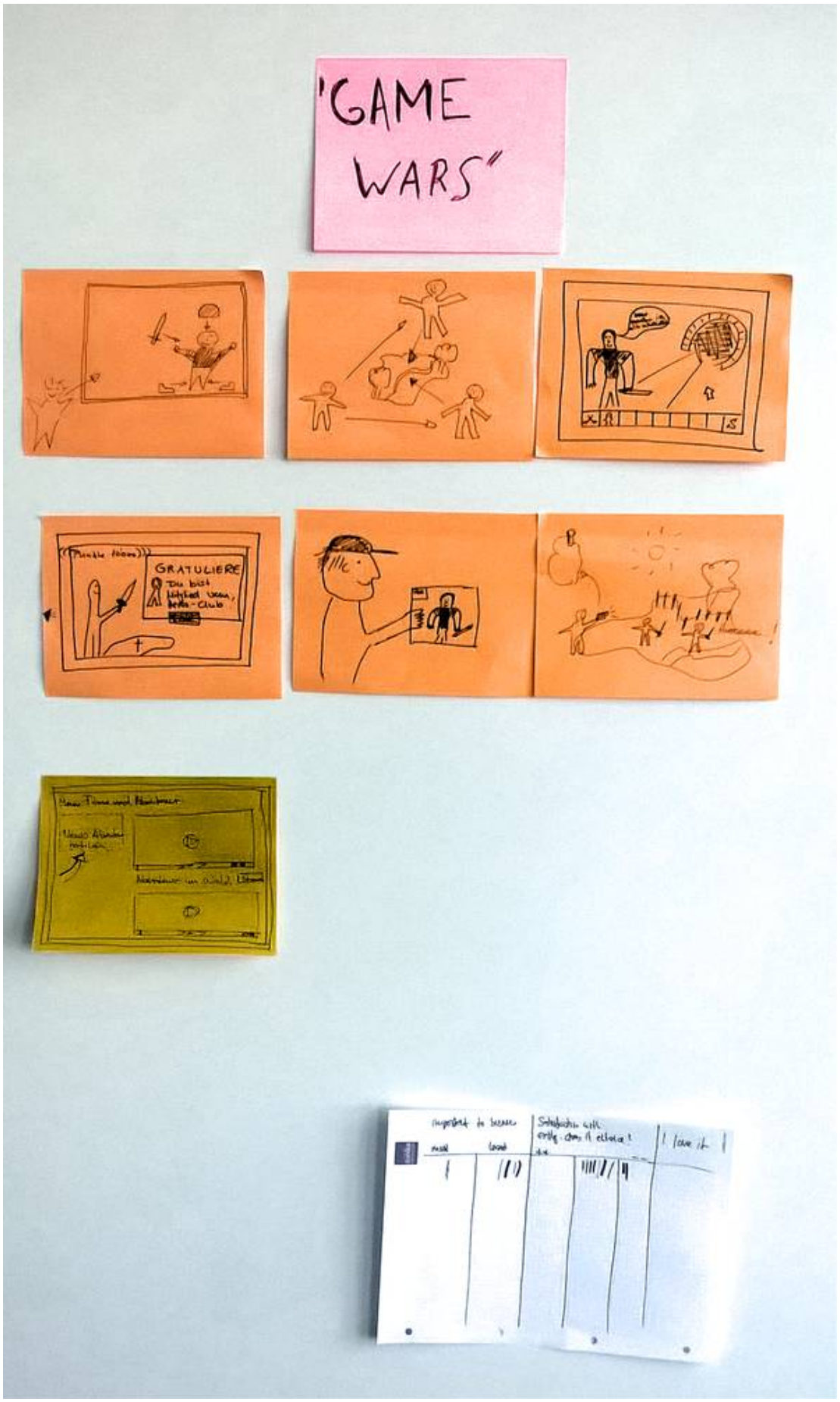
Preparing the pitch, scenarios, user journey, need, approach, benefit, competitor and votings on 1 whiteboard

The Stars to Road workshop is a toolbox and additionally it contains:

- Theory behind product innovation and different product types (disruptive anyone? iterative?)
- Where do ideas usually get born and where companies spend most of their money
- Techniques to gather and refine ideas for products
- Tools to reduce uncertainty and assumptions about users and their needs
- Rating and filtering techniques for product ideas
- What is needed for doing all this, what kind of team and context works well
  I was surprised to have so many hands-on sessions in a 1-day class where we got to test out different tools and idea refinement techniques. Markus told us lots of stories from his experience with user experience and product hunting and at the end of the day I had a huge list of new tools, books and things to test and learn about. Thanks Markus!

This day was worth the time and money and every software engineer should attend this class From Stars to Road.
Let the idea storming begin.

How do you gather, refine and test new product ideas? How much do you spend planning and how much experimenting?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