The Kanban Game

Kanban, Pull and Organizational Change Management



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# Introducing the Game

The purpose of the game is to teach the mechanics of a pull system, the benefits of limited WIP and getting things done, the importance of managing queues correctly, the metrics that should be captured in a pull system, how to use those metrics to enact effective change, and how a team can effectively self-organize to accomplish the goals

# Setting Up The Game

Before starting the game, there are a number of steps that should be taken to set up the persons involved in the game, the game play area, and the work item cards for the game.

## The Facilitator

The job of the facilitator is to keep the game going, help the participants see and understand the principles and practices of a Kanban system, and offer insight through questions and comments about the current state of the game in relation to the goals of the participants.

The facilitator should have a strong understanding of Kanban and Pull systems, the metrics being captured, and how those metrics should facilitate improvements in the system. The facilitator should also have some experience as a team coach and engaging team members in Socratic dialogue to enable learning.

## The Participants

To keep the game moving and prevent interest from waning, I recommend no more than 5 to 7 participants in addition to the facilitator. As the team grows in size, it takes more and more time to complete a round, which may cause interest to drop over time.

Prior to playing the game, the participants should have a least a cursory understanding of what a Kanban system is – how to visualize a process and identify queues, why limited WIP is important, and the basic mechanics of a pull system. This can be done just prior to the game being played, or can be done via other presentations and discussions at an earlier time. Once the participants have such an understanding, you can set up the basic playing area for the game.

## The Game Play Area

A very large whiteboard is the optimal playing area for the game. I recommend at least 8 to 10 feet wide and 3 to 4 feet tall. If you can get a larger area, you should. If no whiteboard of sufficient size is available, a large sheet of paper should suffice.

The game play area should be set up to represent a simple system that work will flow through, as a visual task board with queues and areas to notate the work in process limits. The steps in the process that will be drawn onto the game play area should include:

* **Ideation**: the area where work items first appear in the game. Represents some initial ideas about what the system may need to do. This is a queue of items that are ready to be worked through the system
* **Problem Definition**: the first ‘work’ step of the game. Represents anything from requirements gathering to analysis, and any other task that may be involved in understanding the problem to be solved. There should be a ‘Done’ queue attached to this step, to hold work that has been completed and is ready for the next step
* **Solution Definition**: the second ‘work’ step of the game. Represents the design and implementation of a solution to the problem, including UI design, software development, and any other tasks involved in creating a solution for the defined problems. There should be a ‘Done’ queue attached to this step, to hold work that has been completed and is ready for the next step
* **Demo and Delivery**: the final ‘work’ step of the game. Represents the process of demoing the working solution to the customer, obtaining any needed feedback, and making final delivery of the solution into the production environment
* **Delivered**: the ‘output’ of the game. All work items should eventually end up in this holding tank. Final metrics for work items will be calculated when work items reach this step.

I recommend that no more than three ‘work’ steps be included in the process, once again to facilitate the continued movement of the game and keep interest of the participants.

The Kanban board, when drawn on the game play area, should resemble the following:

### Tracking Round and Roll Order

Beside the Kanban board, an area should be marked off to keep track of the round number and the order of dice rolls for the participants.

The dice roll order is arbitrary. It does not matter who goes first and who goes last and the order is not tied to the specific functions (steps in the process) or activities that a given person may participate in during the game.

Round # is used to calculate how long a work item has been in the system as a whole, as well as the individual steps. A round is started when the first person in the dice roll order is ready to roll the dice. A round ends when the last person in the dice roll order has rolled their dice and performed the appropriate actions.

### Tracking Overall Metrics

An area should also be marked off to track to the metrics for the game, including average lead time, average time in queues, process cycle efficiency, etc. The list of metrics that should be captured and why, will be detailed later in **Playing The Game**.

## The Work Item Cards

To simulate work in the system, work item cards should be created, using 5x7 index cards. These cards will contain information about how much work needs to be done for each step of the process, as well as metrics to show the performance of the team in each of the steps and for the system as a whole, concerning the individual work item.

### Tracking Progress of Work Items

The work item cards should contain a column for each of the steps in the overall system process. These columns will be used to track various metrics as the work item progresses through the steps of the system. Additionally, a column for tallying the final metrics for the card should be added to the cards.

### Tracking Round # for Each Step

When a work item card enters a given step, the current round number should be noted in the ‘Round #’ column. This will facilitate the Lead Time metric and allow the participants to see how long a work item card has been in a given step and in the system as a whole.

### Required # of Successful Rolls

For every card, in every step in the process, there is a place to note the required number of successful rolls. This is used to indicate how much work it will take to call a specific task for a specific work item ‘Done’. This number at each step represents an estimate of how much work it will take to complete the work item. Rather than having actual estimates done by the participating team members, though, the required number of successful rolls will be set up when the work item card enters the ‘Ideation’ queue.

### Successful Rolls

As the game progresses, dice rolls are used to determine what actions happen against a given work item. When a dice roll indicates a ‘Successful’ roll, a tick mark is added to the ‘Successful Rolls’ section of the work item card, for the correct step.

# Playing the Game

The basic process of the game is to play in rounds, rolling the dice and processing work item tickets through the various steps, to completion. There are a number of steps that should be taken to facilitate the simulation of a non-linear, variable system such as software development. Each of the steps in playing the game has been specifically designed to facilitate the metrics and the goals of the system, as well as the teams’ understanding of the system and how the team organization is affecting the flow of work.

## The Goals of the Team

The primary goal of the team is to complete the work items with the lowest possible lead time per work item. The team should focus on preventing bottlenecks from building up high WIP.

Additionally, the team should prevent resources from being starved for work as this causes unnecessary overhead on the team.

## The Rules of the Game

The basic rules of the game are fairly simple:

1. The team of participants decides how to organize to get work done and can reorganize at any given time, to facilitate getting work done more efficiently. Try to be ‘realistic’ about how the team is organized
2. The team of participants decides on the WIP limits of each step and can change the WIP limits at any time, provided they can state reasons for the change. Try to be reasonable about the WIP limits.
3. Don’t exceed the WIP limits of any given step

## Work Items and the ‘Ideation’ Queue

All work items start their progress through the system in the ‘Ideation’ queue.

### Adding Cards the ‘Ideation’ Queue

The facilitator should monitor the ‘Ideation’ queue to ensure that it does not run out of work item cards. At a minimum, this queue should contain at least one card at all times, to ensure that the ‘Problem Definition’ step is able to pull in work immediately, when capacity is available. It is recommended that the facilitator keep more than the minimum of one card in the queue, though.

### Setting the Required Number of Successful Rolls

Before a card is added to the ‘Ideation’ queue, the ‘Required # of Successful Rolls’ must be set for each step in the process. To ensure some variability in the system, a roll of the dice should be used to determine the required number of rolls for each step.

To facilitate the continuous flow of work items through the system, it is recommended that the maximum number of required successful rolls be set at 3. Given a six sided dice to determine the number of required rolls, the following table of values is recommended for translating from six possible values, into three values.

Dice Roll of **1 or 2 = 1** Required Successful Roll

Dice Roll of **3 or 4 = 2** Required Successful Rolls

Dice Roll of **5 or 6 = 3** Required Successful Rolls

The facilitator can choose to use a different formula, manually assign the number of required rolls, or any other process that they see fit. The facilitator may also wish to employ an assistant to maintain the ‘Ideation’ queue and the number of required rolls on each work item card.

## Playing the Game in Rounds

The game is played in rounds. The purpose of the rounds is to keep the game orderly and also to help generate the needed metrics. A round of the game is started when the first person on the Dice Roll Order is ready to roll the dice. A round of the game ends when the last person on the Dice Roll Order has rolled their dice and performed the necessary actions.

### The Round Begins

At the beginning of each round, mark the current round number in the Round # area. Go through the list of the Dice Roll Order one by one and have the people perform the following actions and any required subsequent actions.

### Decide What to Work on

The current participant will decide which work item to work on, if any are available and if they have the capacity to do the work. If there are multiple work items available for the person to work on, the person should decide which item they are going to work on before rolling the dice.

### Pulling In Work

If no work items are currently available for the person, they may pull in a work item from the previous step’s ‘Done’ queue (or the ‘Ideation’ queue if the person is working on the first ‘Problem Definition’ step).

If work is available for the person, and the current step in the process that they are intending to work is at its WIP limit, the person is not allowed to pull work into that step.

If no work is available for the person, after examining all options, they lose their turn.

### The Dice Rolls

If the person has work, the person then rolls the dice and performs the appropriate actions.

There are multiple possible outcomes for any given dice roll, including ‘successful’ rolls, ‘failure’ rolls, and ‘Draw A Card’ rolls. Each of these outcomes has specific actions that need to be taken.

The following is the list of possible rolls, based on standard 6 sided dice:

**1 – 4: Successful Role**. The work item that was chosen is marked with a ‘Successful’ tick. Success represents progress made toward the goal of completing the task for the current step. This may be in the form of documentation, working software, or other artifacts that are produced during the normal development cycle.

**5: Draw A Card**. The person doing the work draws a card and performs the actions stated on the card, including any potential benefits or detriment to the system and team. The ‘Draw A Card’ actions may or may not have an impact on the work item that was chosen.

**6: Failure Role**. The work item that was chosen is not updated with any tick marks and no additional action is taken. Failure represents blocking issues, questions and clarification, and other issues or interruptions and can occur during the normal development cycle.

### Completing a Step

When a work item card has obtained all of the required successful rolls for the current step, the work item is considered complete for that step. The card can then be pushed into the ‘Done’ queue that is attached to the step and is now available for a resource in the next step. If there is no ‘Done’ queue attached to the step in question (the ‘Demo & Delivery’ step), then the work item card is immediately moved into the next step (the ‘Delivered’ state).

### Completing a Work Item

Once a work item has completed all steps and it is sitting in the ‘Delivered’ state, the work item is considered complete and no additional work is required for that item. At this time, the facilitator or the participant that completed the work item, should tally up the final metrics for this work item card and note them on the card.

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