

Battleships

Goal: understand iterative development

Timing?

15-30 minutes

What do I need?

2x Battleships sheets

2x teams (A and B) with at least one player each

Some sheets of sticky coloured dots, to mark out targets (18 in total, grouped into 'ships' as follows: 1x 5, 1x 4, 1x 3, 2x 2, 2x 1) and hits (30)

2x sharpies (to mark hits)

So how do you play?

1. Explain that this is an exercise to help explain the concepts behind iterative development.
2. Give each team a Battleships sheet and 18 sticky dots.
3. Both teams are given 2 minutes to plan their ship placement (horizontal or vertical - no diagonal placement), making 7 'ships' by placing their 18 sticky dots (1x 5 dots, 1x 4 dots, 1x 3 dots, 2x 2 dots, 2x 1 dot) on the 'My Ships' section of their Battleships sheet
4. Team A then takes up to 5 minutes to plan their 30 hits up front, marking these on the 'Their Ships' section of their sheet
5. Once they are finished, team A relay all of their planned hits to team B who respond with the appropriate updates with regards misses, hits and successfully-sunken ships
6. Team B then takes up to 5 minutes to play each of their 30 hits on the 'Their Ships' section of their sheet, this time with real-time feedback from team A on the misses, hits and successfully-sunken ships

It's pretty obvious what will happen - most of the time team B's turn-based (or iterative) play will allow them to adjust and change their plans as they score hits, ultimately achieving the highest score. Team A can score hits of course, but are far less likely to sink all the opposing team's ships.

What do we learn?

- Predictive planning is unreliable and somewhat akin to reading a crystal ball. Ultimately you're predicting the future based on an infinite number of possible outcomes, effects and variables
- The iterative approach however is empirical, and each time team B hits the opposing team's ships, they can instantly change plans and target nearby locations to sink it
- There are a few other parallels you can draw from the exercise too. Team A will often score hits but not sink whole ships - this is akin to features having been developed but not tested before time or money ran out. Team B however may not hit all the ships but are much more likely to sink the ones they do hit, making it a metaphor for "potentially shippable product increments" (pun intended)
- Occasionally Player A will win, but this is a bit like the fortune teller coincidentally getting something right - it's more luck than judgement

