I dared myself to get better at story grooming

Tina Fletcher - November 2021

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Presentation outline

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What is grooming?
Why is it useful?
Why is it hard?
What if you do it poorly?

2. Experiments

10 things I tried with my team over the past year to help improve our story grooming

3. Metrics

6 ideas for how to know if grooming is going well

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Intro

What is grooming? Why is it useful?
Why is it hard? What if you do it poorly?

Backlog grooming is the process of refining outstanding user stories or backlog items, breaking big items into smaller tasks and prioritizing those which need to be tackled first.

https://airfocus.com/glossary/what-is-backlog-grooming/

Why is grooming useful?

Uncover risks and impacts

A chance for the whole team to think about how to improve the likelihood of success for upcoming work.

Discuss implementation and test approaches

This helps everyone to understand how long it might take to build something.

Opportunity to reassess priority and scope

Clarify or change the team's thoughts on what to do now vs later, or never.

Why is grooming hard?

Finding the right depth

It's very easy to skip over important details, or to spend way too much time discussing them.

Keeping everyone engaged

Effective grooming requires input from a variety of roles, but some discussion points are only relevant to a subset of attendees.

We don't know what we don't know

No matter how well we think we understand something in advance, there are always things that need to change once implementation begins.

What if you do grooming poorly?

- Increased likelihood of significant defects and misunderstandings
- Unsure if/when work can be completed

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Experiments and Evolution

Things I tried with my team over the past year
to help improve our story grooming

I DECIDED TO MAKE SOME CHANGES.

I DARED MYSELF TO GET BETTER AT STORY GROOMING.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

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1. No grooming

- Very small team
- Limited long term planning
- Just do it

BUT... some cards were gigantic, while others were just a one line change.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

2. Smallest possible pieces

- Break work into smallest pieces we could think of
- Create one story per tiny piece of work
- If every story was size=tiny, perhaps a consistent velocity would emerge

BUT... this got annoying. The same person would often pick up related stories all at once.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

3. Stop doing Smallest possible pieces

- Started allowing larger stories, but each one has a list of sub-tasks
- Larger, goal-oriented stories made more sense to the whole team

BUT... we still hesitated to start formally estimating story complexity.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

4. But still don't explicitly estimate

- We still wanted to avoid adding an explicit estimation step in our grooming process
- Use number of sub-tasks as a proxy for complexity and size

BUT... we could no longer get away with occasional, selective grooming.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

5. Introduce cross functional grooming meetings

- We found ourselves debating requirements while devs were demoing completed work
- Started a weekly grooming meeting to gather input and keep everyone informed

BUT... at first we spent most of the time just defining what we wanted to build.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

6. Stories must be prepped before grooming

- ★ Stories have to be defined in full
- ★ Stories have to be agreed upon by 3LS
- ★ This needs to take place before grooming meeting starts

BUT... most stories became “ready” for grooming just minutes before the meeting began. Hard for devs to jump right into work break down.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

7. Pre-grooming story review

- Stories that would be covered during grooming meeting had to be shared in advance with the dev team
- Gave a chance to prep questions, think about potential complications

BUT... product and design team usually had a mad scramble early in the week.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

8. Build a runway of groomed stories

- ★ PdM and Design ideally working on things that we'll groom in 1-2 weeks (rather than in 1-2 days)
- ★ Used some time where dev team was doing Dragon Slayer projects to build the initial buffer

BUT... we can't groom things TOO far in advance, especially in a rapidly changing product.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

Detour: The story of that poor new guy

- ★ “Paper Cuts” - small, non-urgent improvements
- ★ Perfect for new people
- ★ But we often haven’t looked at them in a while...

9. Grooming expires

- Don’t groom too far in advance (one time, we unintentionally deleted an entire feature!)
- If too much time elapses between initial grooming and when something gets worked on, we have to re-groom it

BUT... our team had grown a lot. It felt bad to get too deep into implementation details during the cross-functional meeting.

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

10. Add dev-only grooming meetings

- Needed to talk through more of the implementation details before starting on stories (agree on approach, give more context for newer people)
- Scheduled a second, dev-only grooming meeting each week

10 Evolutionary Steps on Our Journey

Are we there yet?

- Current process is working pretty well, for now
- But we're already looking ahead to some future improvements
- What is "there", anyway, and how do you even know?

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Success Metrics

Ideas for how to know if grooming is going well
(some numbers, some feelings)

6 METRICS AND SIGNALS FOR GROOMING SUCCESS

Team's attitude towards grooming

Do they love it or hate it?

stories groomed per meeting

Can we cover an appropriate amount of work in a session?

% of people who say something

Are most of the participants actively involved during grooming discussions?

Predictability of team velocity

Is work being broken down in an effective and consistent way?

Amount of dev re-work

Do we sufficiently discuss and agree on approaches we want to take?

Amount of defects found in prod

Do we sufficiently think through important risks and use cases?

Team's attitude towards grooming

- Do people dread the meeting?
- Does it come up at every Retro?
- Or are people excited to discuss new work and decide how to tackle it?

Stories Groomed per Meeting

- Ideally, the team could groom a sprint's worth of work in one session
- Avoid getting stuck in the weeds on 1 or 2 stories, or covering tons of stories at only a surface level

% of people who say something

- Does most of the conversation take place between only a couple of people?
- What might be preventing others from participating?

Predictability of team velocity

- Are the right things discussed in order to understand the size and complexity of work?
- Or are there always surprises after starting to build things?

Amount of dev re-work

- Changing our minds after trying something out is normal
- But look for ways to test ideas before building them (effective grooming discussions are one method)

Amount of defects found in prod

- Is the team able to think of risks and key user scenarios up front?
- Or is there more opportunity to dig in to these topics during grooming?

6 METRICS AND SIGNALS FOR GROOMING SUCCESS

Team's attitude towards grooming

If people like the process, it's probably useful.

stories groomed per meeting

If you can cover a week's worth of work in an hour, discussions are probably at a good level of depth.

% of people who say something

If most people actively participate, it's probably a good use of everyone's time.

Predictability of team velocity

If team velocity is consistent (ish) over time, work is probably being broken down clearly and consistently.

Amount of dev re-work

If re-work is infrequent, work is probably well understood and agreed upon.

Amount of defects found in prod

If defect discovery in prod is infrequent, important risks and use cases are probably being discussed up front.

The end

Conclusion

Some key things to take away from this talk

Grooming is hard, but important

Doing it poorly puts team and product health at risk

There are many ways to do it

There's no method that works for every team, all the time

It doesn't have to suck!

If it's awkward or you hate it, it's time to try a new experiment

THANKS!

Any questions?

What are your best grooming tips?

Credits

Special thanks to all the people who made and released these awesome resources for free:

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