SLICING
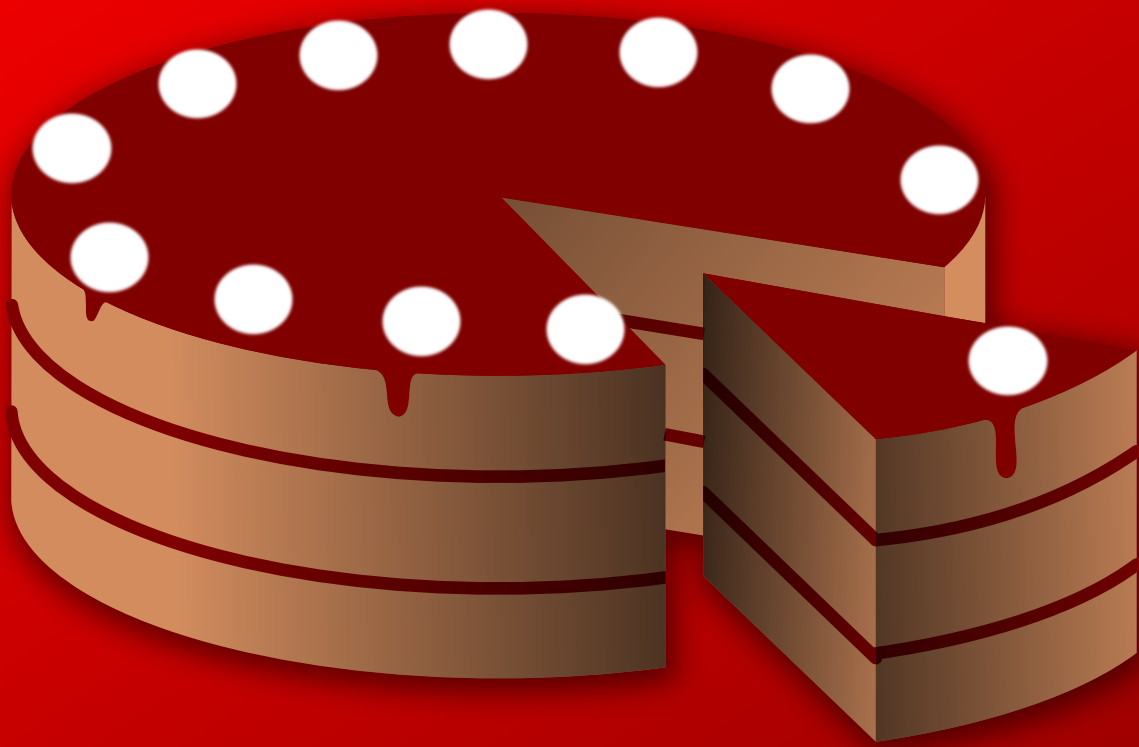
THE CAKE

Learn how to split user stories using Richard Lawrence's 9 splitting patterns

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Slicing the Cake – facilitation guide

Table of Contents

About this game

The idea to make this game came after doing a workshop about how to do story mapping and how to slice stories to a sprintable size. I experienced that people who even attended a training about (among other things) story slicing didn't know/remember how to apply the story splitting patterns…

During training sessions I always refer to the story splitting patterns of Richard Lawrence. There are several resources for explaining how to slice user stories (like the SPIDR approach of Mike Cohn), but for some reason I always preferred Richard's story splitting flowchart. So that workshop inspired me: why not make a game, a playful exercise, to properly learn how to apply these story splitting patterns?

That's how I got the idea to make a card game: start from scenarios that everyone understands, make the participants find the right story slices and have them reflect about the applied slicing patterns (using Richard Lawrence's flowchart) instead of having to apply the patterns themselves. That will come later.

The game is limited to 5 scenarios, but there is also an empty PDF-document so that you can write your own user stories, applicable to your own context, which you can use in your (company-specific?) training/learning sessions. If this is not bound to non-disclosure, it would be interesting to share these stories with others so that we can have a richer set of user stories to learn from.

Koen Vastmans, SimuLearn
August 2022

Content of the game

The game consists of in total 2 decks of 56 cards, with 9 cards containing the explanation of the different story splitting patterns, 5 large user stories and then the refinement of these 5 large user stories, according to the different story splitting patterns. The 5 large user stories deal with the following scenarios:

- booking a hotel room (not via a booking site but directly through the site of the hotel)
- shopping online
- booking a flight
- reserving a theater ticket
- subscribing to a telco service

These are all recognizable scenarios, the most of us probably all did in real life, so that it isn't too much of an effort to imagine the possible steps you need to go through to successfully complete a scenario.

Aim of the game

The aim of the game is to learn how to use the story splitting patterns of Richard Lawrence. You do this by splitting a large user story into smaller user stories, based on the acceptance criteria. The first splitting pattern to apply is "workflow steps". After identifying the workflow steps of the large user story, you will have to see if and how you need to further split these user stories. Again, this is done based on the acceptance criteria of the first refined user stories.

You will not need to write the user stories yourself, instead you will need to find the appropriate user stories in the different stacks of cards. That way you don't need to focus on writing correct stories, but focus on the story splitting patterns instead.

The outcome of the game should be 3-fold:

- learn & understand the different story splitting patterns
- learn some examples you can refer to afterwards
- see how story mapping can help with slicing user stories

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Getting started

Preparation
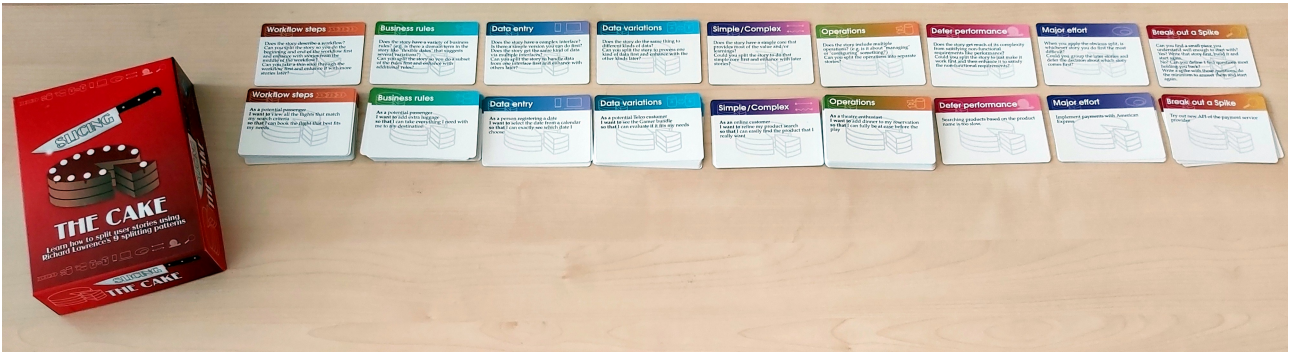
Put all the large user stories in an envelope or a bag so that the participants can blindly pick 1 card. Put the cards with explanation of all the story splitting patterns on a row and put the corresponding detailed stories with the corresponding pattern below the explanation of that pattern (as shown on the picture).

First round

Someone of the participants blindly picks a card from the envelope or bag and puts it on the table with the user story to the front. Now everyone can read that user story. Next you flip the card so that everyone can read the acceptance criteria of that user story.

The first round is about identifying the workflow steps. You can ask the participants if they can already come up with (some of) the workflow steps, based on the acceptance criteria or you just let them search the corresponding workflow steps in the stack of cards. Cards with workflow steps should be put horizontally, one step after the other. Keep in mind that the order of the workflow steps matters and that there could be some cards in the stack that are not a correct workflow step for the selected large user story. That is on purpose, to make sure that the participants read the information in the acceptance criteria.

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Second round

In the second round you need to flip all the workflow steps one by one and read the acceptance criteria to determine if further refinement is possible/needed. This is where all the other story splitting patterns will come into the picture.

For each workflow step that needs further refinement, put the refined stories vertically below the corresponding workflow step. Make the participants think about what refinements could be possible based on the acceptance criteria, instead of simply searching through the stacks of cards for user stories that sound like they relate to the scenario they're working on.

Third round?

It could be that some stories can still be further refined. There is only 1 way to find out: check the acceptance criteria of the refined stories that you discovered in round 2 to see if further refined is possible/needed.

End result

After doing all story refinements you should end up with something like this:

What does this look like? Exactly, a story map for 1 large story, with the workflow steps as backbone on the top and the further refined user stories below.

This story map can trigger further discussions among the participants. As you know the most important stories of the story map are at the top. So what you can do next, is have a discussion with the team, to see what the walking skeleton could be. The walking skeleton is kind of the minimal viable product of the story map: the first set of stories that need to be implemented to have something valuable.

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Have a discussion with the participants:

- What are the most important stories to get started with?

- What would be the first smallest stories you would implement?

- What workflow steps could be delayed to a later moment?

- What could a first iteration look like?

If, as a facilitator, you know which spikes or performance related stories are available, you could trigger the participants with "what if...?" questions.

Thank you!

This game would not have existed if Richard Lawrence had not created the this valuable source of information about user story slicing, including the story splitting flow chart. I really appreciate the fact that Richard allowed me to use his name as reference this game.

I did several try-outs, already at an early stage with limited scenarios available, at least to validate the concept op the game. Many thanks to the following people for their feedback:

- The people of Nowshak: Stéphane Thanasack, François Jaffrennou, Benoit Gilson & Valentin Carrez

- David Crow

- Chris Stone

- Roxanne Caulfield

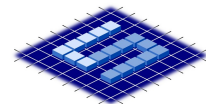- Soledad Pinter

- Joanna Masraff

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Slicing the Cake is a product of SimuLearn.

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