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# White Elephant Sizing

Posted by Don McGreal on September 26th, 2009 at 8:52 pm

*Note: If you haven't heard of White Elephant Gift Exchanges before, read this.*

**Ingredients:**

- Sizing board (a whiteboard or flip-chart or the like; divided into 5 columns: XS, S, M, L, XL)
- Timer
- A set of prepared stories
- A set of 5 X 3 cards
- Tape for attaching the cards to the board

**Recipe:**

Have the team stand-up in a half circle facing their sizing board.

Shuffle a deck of story cards and place them face down on a table in front of the sizing board. Place a timer next to the cards.

The game begins when the facilitator starts the timer, which is the signal for the first member to perform the following steps:

- pick the top card off the deck
- attach a piece of tape to the card
- read the story on the card out loud
- assigns the card to one of the five columns on the board (XS, S, M, L, XL)
- provide a reason to the group
- start the timer for the next player

It is important assigning the card to one of the five columns has to be the player's own decision, without any external interference. This is why the player should provide the reason for his or her decision after the card has been assigned. If the player does not assign the card within one minute, the card will be assigned to the column in the middle. The player then restarts the timer for the next player.

After sizing the card, the player presents his or her reason. The reason may be based on expert knowledge, from past experiences, or observations from other projects. It is essential that the rest of the team observes and listens carefully to understand the overall context and development of the board. All other team members are therefore silent without discussions or judgment.

After a few rounds, there should be enough cards on the board to give the team members the option to, on their turn, move an existing card on the board into a different column instead of picking a new card from the deck. As before, the player reads the story out loud followed by a reason which supports the decision to re-size.
Once all user story cards are on the board and sized, each team member, on their turn, can either continue moving cards between columns or simply "pass" if they are satisfied with the current results. If a player does not make a decision within the one-minute time-limit, it will be interpreted as a "pass".

The game ends when the pile of story cards is gone and every member of the team signals "pass".

**Challenges:**
The biggest challenge in the beginning is the lack of a reference story – the Chihuahua (see Doggy Planning). Because no card has been assigned yet, the first player will not have something to compare his or her story to. And since the cards will be shuffled, we won't know if the first stories are really small, medium, or large until we uncover more stories. This is OK and and important lesson of the game. Every player will have the opportunity to change their mind in future rounds, so the important thing is to just get started. Remember, the game does not stop until all players signal "pass".

It is quite typical that two or more players disagree about a few assignments, and the card may end up endlessly moving up and down the board. If this happens, just take the card and place it on the bottom of the deck. That way, the sizing can continue and the card should have more context after all the other cards have been sized.

**Learning Points:**

- Group user stories according to their relative size/effort
- Reach a democratic consensus quickly
- Ensure that each team member has a say
- Learn how user stories are captured
- Actively collaborate in a fun way

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**Variations**

- Play with 3 (S,M.L) columns instead of 5 (XS, S, M, L, XL)
- Begin with 3 columns until the team requests more granularity, then the moderator adds additional columns
- Assign the Fibonacci sequence to the columns (1,2,3,5,8)

**CREDIT:** Jochen Krebs

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Rating: 4.6/**5** (20 votes cast)

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Written by: Don McGreal on September 26, 2009.
Last revised by: Don McGreal on May 21, 2012.

## 7 Responses to "White Elephant Sizing"

### Agile Projects and Portfolios » Blog Archive » Tasty Cup Cakes - Trainer Resource

October 14, 2009 at 5:17 am

[...] Check out TastyCupCakes which offers a set of games for a variety of classroom topics. You will find not only a description of the games but also a section with a checklist how to reflect with the participants. The pattern style overview of the games make it a great trainer resource. If you have games, which you have played successfully in the past, share them with TCC. I for example submitted the "Sizing Game". [...]

### Don McGreal

August 26, 2010 at 12:19 pm

I recently tried this at at the DFW Scrum User Group and it worked great! Much quicker than planning poker and the obvious questions of "What happens to our conversations?" and "What if the individual knows nothing about the topic being sized?" seem to go away once you've played a few rounds.
In the meeting, I couldn't really use an actual software backlog since they weren't on a project together. So I instead came up with a list of 20 household chores, ranging from small (pack lunch) to large (build a shed), to ambiguous (call mom), to large and ambiguous (renovate kitchen). See the full list below.
It went so well, that my colleague and I tried it with our client's actual backlog the very next day. Worked like a charm.

Vacuum Rugs
Build a Shed
Clean Out Garage
Clean Out Closet
Paint Fence
Build a Deck
Mow the Lawn
Plant Begonias
Pay Bills
Change the Car Oil
Call Mom
Shop for School Supplies
Organize Family Vacation
Renovate Kitchen
Replace Roof
Cook Dinner
Plan for Family Reunion
Pack Lunch
Take Dogs to Vet
Go to Dentist

Rating: 4.4/**5** (7 votes cast)

### Mike Pearce

January 14, 2011 at 9:04 am

I used this recently in an 'Agile Dojo'. We had a lot of fun with it! I used the stories posted by Don McGreal as I knew what would happen if I used real stories from the backlog – the guys would just endlessly talk about how they would fix it. Using these ambiguous and anonymous stories really helps get the point home.

I did this with a large group, 25 people. So, I split them into two groups both with the same sets of stories. As an interesting twist, when both groups finished, we stuck all the stories onto one board. What we discovered was that both groups had estimated all but one of the stories the same, relatively, as the other group. All the stories from group A that were a '3' were a '5' from group B and the same for all the other stories.

When I do this again (and I will) I'll make sure that both teams start with the same card and see if they estimate all the stories the same, OR I'll give them a story with a number already on it and tell them that, while they can change the number on any OTHER story, they can't change this one and see if they estimate all (or a majority) of the stories the same.

This really reinforces the point that, HOW you do the story and WHAT is involved isn't as relevant as how big or small the stories are in relation to each other – especially when both teams have the same estimates.

Rating: 3.0/**5** (2 votes cast)

**Richard Kasperowski**
May 6, 2011 at 6:48 am

In New England, I'm calling this game Yankee Gift Swap Sizing to help people understand the concept.

Rating: 3.0/**5** (2 votes cast)

**Don McGreal**
August 6, 2011 at 9:00 am

Another good technique for this game is to space your sizing columns relative to each other. For instance, if you're using Fibonacci, then 1, 2, 3 would be close together, 5 a little further, 20 at the end of the wall, and 100 would be out of the room. I like to do this because I've noticed people bumping stories up and down a column if they were at all different in size to existing stories without paying attention to the values.

Rating: 5.0/**5** (1 vote cast)

**Karen Favazza Spencer**
May 24, 2012 at 4:59 pm

We used a User Story Map as the starting point, today. We created a duplicate deck with an identifier on each card that traced back to the "backbone" and a "rib." We sized 200+ stories with an experienced subset of six teams who had previously identifed completed stories to represent our categories. We laid the stories on four tables, S, M, L & XL. Then we invited the complete complement of the teams to the workshop where a biz leader talked through the backbone to give them context. Finally, the teams clustered around the tables to discuss & further divide those stories on each table into two groups, time boxed at 20 minutes. They moved back & forth from table to Map and left the workshop smiling. Since I had suggested and ran this exercise, I was smiling, too!

Rating: 5.0/**5** (1 vote cast)

**Karen Favazza Spencer**
April 14, 2013 at 8:41 am

We used the White Elephant technique to determine for scoping the project, as in What is In Scope, and What is Out of Scope, moving around preprinted cards between two tables. It worked beautifully – and the management folks participating loved it!

Criteria: TIme (is it realistic by our target date), Vision (is it consistant), Possibility (impediment consideration)

Rating: 3.0/**5** (2 votes cast)

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