

Are you playing the game? Or are you setting yourself up to win?

Martijn van de Haterd, July 2020

About two years ago while at a dinner party with my team, I got involved in a chess game with the son of a colleague. The kid was around 10, I think, and he had learned how to play and was enthusiastically challenging everyone to a game practicing his newly acquired skill. I learned how to play in my last year of elementary school because of a dedicated teacher who would, every year, teach all his students the tricks of (and love for) the game. I played a lot that year and, apart from the occasional game once every 3 years, have not played much since and would only consider myself an 'okay' chess player.

After playing a game or two (that I'd won) he asked me, "Am I playing well?" The answer was both yes and no (although I'm sure I answered 'yes').

See, he was playing the game. He knew the pieces, how they could move and how they were ranked. Because he was 'trigger-happy' on getting my pieces, he had quite a few ranked up alongside the board, proudly looking over his collection. At times he showed a clever move on the board. So yes, he was playing fine. But still, it was unlikely he was going to win a game that evening.

I was taught by my elementary school teacher that chess is about thinking 3 steps ahead. It's a game of possibilities and it is up to you to predict these plays and the response of your opponent. It's about being proactive, a game is not won by reacting on your opponent's moves.

In this sense, the way he played chess reminded me a lot of how a Product Owner can act. All too often backlog prioritization is done ad hoc, sometimes feeling like it is whichever stakeholder yells the hardest who gets heard. It is hard to reclaim proactiveness when you are with your back against the wall, having to respond to urgent matters. But before you know it you are merely going with the motions, writing user stories, organizing the next sprint. You are playing the game, but are you setting yourself up to win?

Regaining the initiative so you can start looking ahead is key. Strategizing for (at least) 3 sprints ahead allows you to focus on the bigger goals to achieve. It creates space for the development team to engage on these goals and to take more responsibility over the product as a whole. It gives options to still do valuable work when Plan A for some reason can't be picked up. It makes it easier to prioritize functional and technical debt which would otherwise blindside and slow you down later.

Like in chess, where your plan is constantly interrupted by the moves of your opponent, your plan also needs to be reevaluated after each step. Without a plan, this feels like reacting with your back against the wall again. But with a goal in mind, you'll notice the end goal doesn't change (much), though the smaller first steps might. Keep communicating the end goal with stakeholders and the development team. When the team is aligned, they can help in these next moves allowing you to maintain focus on the bigger goals.

As a Product Owner who do you want to be? The kid proudly lining up the pieces alongside the board. Or do you want to strategize a plan and set yourself up to win?