By Nolwenn Kerzreho and Joe Gollner

Image: @ Museum of Games and Gaming

Nolwenn Kerzreho is the technical account manager for Europe for IXIASOFT, a provider of XML content management software. An international speaker at leading events and academic colloquiums, Nolwenn teaches technical communication at Université Rennes. Based in France, Nolwenn has international work experience in the chemical, telecom, language, and high-tech industries.

Twitter: @nolwennIXIASOFT
Nolwenn.Kerzreho[at]ixiasoft.com
www.ixiasoft.com

Playing your way to better content management and collaboration

From subject matter experts to content creators, project managers and even translation and localization experts, content management projects involve a lot of people, rendering these projects complex and challenging. The classic game of Snakes & Ladders – adapted to the world of content management – provides a playful tool for people to come together and discuss pathways to a successful project.

The role of games in project planning

Using games to help people work through challenges is not a new idea. Games help people to think through and talk about topics that might be difficult to discuss in a formal business setting. The point is to allow people to simplify issues and to discuss them in a way that is intentionally lighthearted and enjoyable. While exploring the possible use of the Snakes & Ladders game for project planning, we were driven by the belief that people feel more at ease about sharing ideas and discussing issues when designing a game than they would be in a marathon project planning session. We further believed that the real value lay not so much in playing the game as in working together to design a game that reflects a shared reality.

Snakes & Ladders, an ancient game from India, is considered a "virtue game" in that it promotes good actions (ladders) and warns against risks (snakes). The concept is that players try to complete a journey across a game board, on which they encounter risks (snakes) that will set them back as well as opportunities to move ahead (ladders). This journey can be correlated to almost any kind of process or project scenario.

After some initial research and an experiment designing a game board based on a DITA adoption project, we decided to develop a content management project-planning workshop that would leverage the Snakes & Ladders game. The project scenario for this workshop focused on how a content management system could be leveraged to facilitate content collaboration with subject matter experts (SMEs). This focus appeared relevant because facilitating content collaboration across organizational silos is a goal that is as common as it is challenging. The idea was that, by collaborating on the design of a game, people would start talking about their collaboration challenges. In short, the workshop was designed to make people collaborate on improving how they collaborate.

Joe Gollner is the director of Gnostyx Research Inc., provider of lean content solutions. He has been active in the content management industry for over 25 years. In 2014, he received the Matthew Arnold faculty award from the University of Oxford for recent contributions made to the field of Digital Humanities.

jag[at]gnostyx.com
www.gnostyx.com
www.gollner.ca

The game model

Let's take a look at the various elements of the Snakes & Ladders game and how they can be used to facilitate cross-silo collaboration in content management project planning. The game model is made up of a game board and two basic game building blocks: snakes and ladders.

Project game board

The game board consists of a grid of squares. The starting point at the bottom left corner represents the starting conditions of the project (start), and the end point at the top right corner represents the achievement of the project goals (success). In our workshops, the game board was laid out with seven columns and seven rows, for a total of 49 spaces. The seven rows were associated with seven common project phases (from bottom to top, start to finish):

- **Discovery** – the initiation activities focus on identifying the problems or needs that require a solution, and the collection of initial measurement data.
- **Planning** – the preparation of an initial project roadmap together with the business case that justifies the investment required the players to address the identified problems or needs.
- **Analysis** – the collection of the detailed information needed to support the implementation of a suitable solution, including the identification of candidate technology components.
- **Pilot** – the test deployment of the candidate solution (with its selected technology components) undertaken for the purpose of validating the recommended approach.
- **Implement** – the deployment of the successfully piloted solution and preparation for the transition of the business processes onto the new solution.
- **Transition** – the transition of the business processes and user community to operate using the deployed solution.
- **Use** – the operational use of the deployed solution and the transitioned business processes.
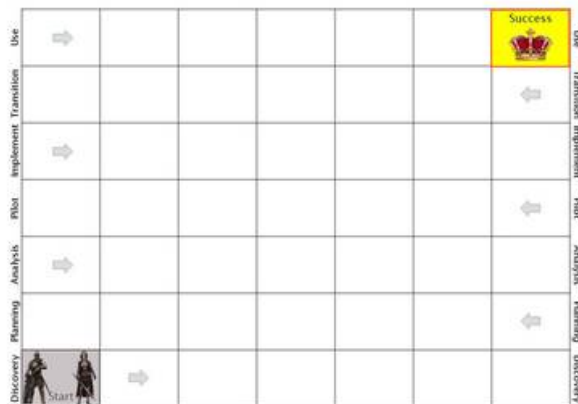

Figure 1 - Snakes & Ladders game board
Source: Kerzreho/Gollner

Game building blocks

The snakes and ladders represent, respectively, the risks that a project may face and the responses that might be deployed to address or avoid those risks. The combination of these building

blocks can be used to represent the ever-changing mix of problems and opportunities that will be part of every new project.

- **Snakes** – a project risk or threat. A snake delays a project or sets it back in its progress towards its goal. Landing on a square with a head of a snake will result in the game piece being moved downward to the tail of the snake. An example of a common snake that would threaten a content management project is "IT group opposes project". Another would be "collaborators resist change".
- **Ladders** – a project best practice or tactic. A ladder advances, or accelerates, a project towards its goals. Landing on a square that shows the bottom of a ladder will result in the game piece being moved upward to the top of the ladder. "Engage an executive champion" is an example of an important ladder that can be deployed to help a content management project deal with a variety of risks. Another example is "ensure win-win for collaborators".
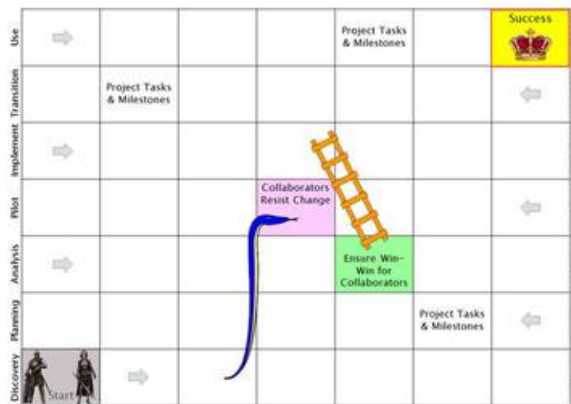

Figure 2 - Adding building blocks to the game board
Source: Kerzreho/Gollner

Designing games

Before we can play a game of Snakes & Ladders, someone has to lay out the game board, complete with its unique arrangement of snakes and ladders. This is where the collaboration among stakeholders is the most intense and the most productive. Of all the things that might go wrong with a project, the game designers need to agree on what risks are most likely to happen, when they are most likely to occur, and how severe the consequences will be. In looking at best practice responses to these risks, the game designers must ask what responses (ladders) will have the greatest beneficial effects and which responses they will be able to implement given the limitations that come with every project. Working through these questions, the game designers will position their snakes and ladders so that the board reflects their shared understanding of the content management project ahead of them.

The designers need to keep the following things in mind:

- **Snakes** are typically distributed on the game board first and then **ladders** are added to reflect how the identified risks (snakes) will be avoided or addressed.
- The length of a **snake** represents its potential impact. A long snake will set a player back several project phases

(rows).
- The length of a **ladder** represents its potential benefit but also its **potential cost**. A long ladder will move a player forward through several project phases (rows). This will have the effect of avoiding whatever snakes appear in the sidestepped rows. Although this is attractive, a long ladder will also be an expensive one, measured in terms of the funds, time and effort required.
- As a **rule of thumb**, loops are not permitted: a snake should not lead directly to the base of a ladder and a ladder should not lead directly to the head of a snake.

Using the game board, building blocks and the rules that have been identified, project stakeholders can create a Snakes & Ladders game that reflects the typical structure of a content management project as well as the unique considerations governing their own project. Now, let's look at what happened when we used these tools to conduct project planning workshops with experienced content management practitioners.

Conducting the workshops

We conducted the Snakes & Ladders workshop for content management project planning on four separate occasions in 2015. We will look at what we learned regarding content management project risks and best practice responses in the next section, but first let's look at what we learned about conducting Snakes & Ladders workshops for content management project planning.

Findings for better workshops

A successful workshop is one that brings together groups of people and takes them through the stages of planning a content management project by designing a Snakes & Ladders game. Working in groups, people were exposed to the very same communication challenges that their projects will face in the real world. We found that collaboration groups of five to seven people were just right: small enough to allow everyone to contribute, but large enough to bring together a vital diversity of perspectives.

We further discovered that we needed to take some initial steps to get people oriented and to help them to collaborate more energetically. An ice-breaker exercise was introduced, which asked participants to prepare persona descriptions, complete with a caricature drawing, for their most problematic collaborator. Sharing these personas helped people to see that everyone was in fact facing very similar challenges. This set the stage for successful group collaboration.

During the group activities, we learned that it is important to help groups get started. We did this by providing them with previously prepared materials to start with. For example, we provided a list of candidate snakes (risks) from which the groups could choose. We then encouraged groups to add new snakes. The same thing was done for the second activity, selecting the ladders they saw as being most useful in addressing the previously selected snakes.

We also added a key constraint to the third and final activity, the layout of a game using the chosen snakes and ladders. The game board worksheet we provided came with a number of unlabeled snakes. Groups were asked to start by assigning the snakes chosen in the first activity to the snakes already placed on the board. The groups then continued by adding more

snakes and then deploying the ladders. Structuring activities to help groups get started proved to be extremely important.

Phase	Discovery	Progress
1	Overall goals - building shareable knowledge	✔
2	Game principles and example of board	✔
3	(optional) Ice-breaker individual activity	✔
4	Introducing principles of building blocks	✔
5	Introducing presenters' favorite snakes and ladders	✔
6	Activity – selecting snakes and creating new ones	✔
7	Activity – selecting corresponding ladders and creating new ones	✔
8	Activity – placing snakes and ladders on the board	✔
9	Activity – teams presenting results to the audience	✔

Figure 3: Final delivery sequence and structure for the workshop
Source: Kerzreho/Gollner

Analyzing workshop results

The common sequence and structure of the group activities in the workshops meant that we were able to collect, compare and analyze the results of the different workshops. The groups identified which snakes and ladders they felt applied to their project and laid them out on their game boards. The groups also emphasized which snakes and ladders they saw as the most important. The table below provides a summary of the results. Prominent snakes and ladders are in bold.

Standard Set of Snakes	Selected	Emphasized	Standard Set of Ladders	Selected	Emphasized
Collaborators too busy	*14*	*3*	Engage IT early	*3*	
Collaborators competing	*1*		Align with policies	*1*	
Collaborators too possessive	*3*		Emphasize customer benefits	*6*	*2*
Collaborators weak communicators	*7*		Conduct stakeholder briefings	*5*	
Collaborators question value	*4*		Prototype collaboration tools	*1*	
Collaborators reject tool	*10*	*1*	Pilot collaboration tools	*5*	
Collaborators resist change	*4*	*2*	**Demonstrate customer benefits**	*8*	*1*
Management questions ROI	*1*		**Engage collaborators early**	*9*	*1*
Inadequate budget set	*1*	*1*	**Engage executive champion**	*14*	*5*
Unrealistic schedule set	*3*		Publicize project successes	*3*	
Crisis changes priorities	*10*	*5*	**Engage management on issues**	*8*	*1*
Weak PM overwhelmed	*2*		**Ensure win-win for collaborators**	*11*	*1*
Legacy practices overemphasized	*6*		**Involve users in tool selection**	*8*	
IT blocks project	*2*		**Train power users**	*9*	*1*
Incomplete tool requirements	*5*		Provide user support	*6*	
			Deliver ongoing training	*4*	
New Snakes Added & Emphasized			**New Ladders Added & Emphasized**		
No executive sponsorship	*1*	*1*	Incentivized participation	*1*	*1*
Loss of stakeholder engagement	*1*	*1*	Use standards	*1*	*1*
Acquired by different company	*1*	*1*	Define clear stakeholder roles	*1*	*1*
Tool problems	*1*	*1*	Treat SMEs as customers	*2*	*1*
SME training inadequate	*1*	*1*	Formalize new skills	*1*	*1*
Fail operational testing	*1*	*1*	Assign SME responsibilities	*1*	*1*
Lose executive champion	*1*	*1*	Build relationships	*1*	*1*
Expectations change	*1*	*1*			

Figure 4: Summary of workshop results
Source: Kerzreho/Gollner

The results clearly reflect a bias towards the candidate set of snakes and ladders that had been provided in each workshop as a starting point. However, a total of 39 new snakes and 29 new ladders were introduced across the different workshops. Several of these new items were selected as a major snake or ladder and this emphasis was used as a criterion for including the new additions in Figure 4.

Snakes highlighted by workshop participants

Three snakes stood out as clearly the most prominent in group selection and emphasis choices:

- **Collaborators too busy**. When involving SMEs in the collaborative processes, the limited availability of these specialized resources came up repeatedly as a key stumbling block. It was one of the risks that won instant recognition and concurrence with almost all workshop participants. This risk stood out as the most prominent of the snakes selected and emphasized.
- **Crisis changes priorities**. This risk was emphasized as the major snake on more game boards than any other. It was a scenario that several workshop participants were personally familiar with. One example given was of a company acquisition suddenly changing the business and financial landscape.
- **Collaborators reject tool**. This risk, while citing the technology that might be used to engage SMEs, is only partly related to the technology itself. Clearly if the tool does not function properly, collaborators will reject it. This risk is in fact broader than that, and it addresses the very real problem of matching the tool to the needs and working patterns of the SME community.

Prominent ladders

When it came to applied best practices, there was a larger group of ladders that stood out:

- **Engage executive champion**. This ladder focuses on finding and engaging an executive champion who can broker the relationships across organizational boundaries. This ladder was the most frequently emphasized as key to project success.
- **Ensure a win-win for collaborators**. This best practice focuses on ensuring that the changes provide benefits to the SMEs as well as to the documentation team. This ladder ranked as the second most important step that could be taken towards enabling a successful collaboration with SMEs.
- **Engage collaborators early**. This ladder and the remaining four all finished with roughly comparable prominence. This particular ladder focuses on the need to involve SME collaborators as early in an initiative as possible. This way issues and reservations can be addressed before they become a major problem.
- **Train power users**. This ladder focuses on making additional investments in the knowledge of selected power users so that they can help the larger community of SMEs migrate to a modified way of collaborating on content assets.
- **Demonstrate customer benefits**. This ladder focuses on steps that can be taken to make the benefits of collaboration, and in particular those that will be enjoyed by the end customer, visible and tangible to the SMEs.
- **Engage management on issues**. Related to engaging an executive champion, this ladder focuses on leveraging management connections to escalate issues when necessary so that resolutions can be worked out and implemented at the right level.
- **Involve users in tool selection**. This ladder focuses on overcoming potential problems in tool adoption by involving SMEs in the process of selecting, and then customizing, the collaboration tools that they will be expected to use.

Conclusions

Several things stand out as significant in our experience of developing and delivering Snakes & Ladders workshops for facilitating content management project planning.

Firstly, the Snakes & Ladders game model is a natural fit for this use. The game concept proved to be one that all participants were able to grasp quickly and to work with as a planning tool. Based on the feedback received, workshop participants could see the value of using a game model to engage project stakeholders in the often difficult task of identifying project risks and agreeing upon the best ways to address them. In one case, one participant used the Snakes & Ladders workshop to facilitate a content management project planning session with a remote team in India. This participant reported back that this effort had been a success, further proving the ability of the game model to work across cultural boundaries.

Secondly, the effort that was applied to designing, and then refining, the workshop has produced a very high-quality facilitation workshop model that can now be used by organizations to facilitate similar workshops. The workshop is also attractive for the reason that it includes an expanding library of project risks (snakes) and best practice responses (ladders) that project stakeholders can consider when reviewing their own projects. It is worth noting that, in 2015 alone, over 100 experienced content management practitioners participated in the workshops and contributed new snakes and ladders to this library.

Finally, it is often said that the cultural side of content management projects is the most important factor in determining whether an investment in new technology and processes will actually achieve its stated goals. This is doubly true for projects that take on the added challenge of reaching out to and working with subject matter experts in various organizational units. However, in practice, content management project managers often seem to work without any tools or techniques to help them address the cultural aspects of their projects. The Snakes & Ladders workshop is a simple-to-use, low-cost technique that can enable real progress in this area. Project managers can engage their stakeholders in identifying risks and deciding on what to do about them. And this can go a long way towards addressing some of the fundamental change management challenges that accompany every content management project.

Image: A peek into one of the Snakes & Ladders workshops conducted in Utrecht in 2015
Source: Magda Caloian