

You Don't Need a Complicated Story Hierarchy

by Mike Cohn • 27 Comments

Consultants and tool vendors seem to have a penchant for making things complicated. It seems the more complicated we make things, the more our clients need us. And that sells tools and services, I suppose.

On the other hand, I find unnecessary complexity extremely frustrating. It's like the novel I read this week by a first-time author. It was good, but it had too many minor characters who complicated the plot and made the book hard to follow.

The same thing happens when people introduce complicated hierarchies or taxonomies for user stories like this:

~~Hierarchy~~ Feature, Saga, Epic, Novel, Story, Headline

You don't need this. When teams are forced to use complicated taxonomies for their stories, they spend time worrying about whether a particular story is an epic, a saga or merely a headline. That discussion is like the minor character who walks into the novel and needlessly complicates the plot.

But, Mike -- I can hear you asking -- you've written about epics and themes before.

Yes, but those are labels. A story is a story so my recommended story taxonomy is this:

~~User Story with a Circular Pink Error~~

A story is a story is a story.

Some stories are big and they can be labeled as epics. I've used the analogy of movies before.

All movies are movies but some movies are romantic comedies—that's a label, just like *epic* is.

Similarly, *theme* refers to a group of related stories, but not does have to work within a hierarchy. Again using movies, I could have a group of spy movies that would include the James Bond movies and the Austin Powers movies. But a group of comedy movies would include Austin Powers but not James Bond.

So, again, *theme* and *epic* are labels not an implied hierarchy. Don't make things more complicated than they need to be. I haven't come across any reasons to have fancy story hierarchies or taxonomies.

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Tagged: user stories, hierarchy, epic, theme
