

Choose Your Own Agile Adventure



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When I was growing up in the 1980s, my sister and I got hooked on a series of children's books called "Choose Your Own Adventure." They were written so that a reader could choose different paths through the book depending on what choice you made on what to read next. At pivotal points in the story, you were confronted to make a choice on how to proceed. For example, you might come across something like this: "*If you think the missing jewels are hidden in the cave, turn to page 15. If you think the searchers find nothing in the cave, turn to page 21.*" Each path led you in a different direction, with a different variation on the story.

There were several of these decisions to make in the book, creating enough combinations to give the chance to read through the book several times. Each path you chose directed you to completely plausible and interesting story lines written within the book, often with completely different outcomes.

In software development, when we read articles, or listen to people speak about their ideas and experiences, we hear different ideas and opinions. Sometimes, what people say challenges our ideals and makes us feel uncomfortable. We wonder how they could possibly disagree with our favorite idea, process or tool. "*How dare they say that!*"

Unfortunately, when we write or speak about our experiences on software development projects, we can't completely convey what really went on. What was the setting for the story? How did the dialog and narrative read? What were the motives of the characters involved?

Without the benefit of an all-knowing narrator in real-life, we don't observe enough to really know what is going on. When we try to speak or write about our experiences in software projects, the best we can do is convey the general outline of the story, and an outcome.

But what if there are other, similar, completely plausible outcomes? For example, if you changed basic circumstances such as key characters, or the setting, and a couple of important events, a wildly successful Agile project might instead have been an abject failure.

We in the software industry tend to have very strong and emotional opinions about politics, religion, and software development processes. Instead of listening to reports that challenge our beliefs and experience and reading them as an alternate, completely plausible story, we tend to feel defensive. "*They must be doing it wrong!*"

Sure, there might be some Agile process success stories that were flukes and the real reasons they were successful had little to do with the project. There are also some Agile process failure stories that are due to teams with a lack of skill or applying tools and processes completely incorrectly.

However, there are plenty of situations that fall somewhere in the middle. If certain circumstances and people were different, the outcome might have been the opposite. Process successes might be failures, and process failures might be successes, only if circumstances beyond the team's control were different.

So, next time you hear an experience story that challenges your ideals and beliefs, set that initial emotional response aside, and listen to what the speaker has to say. Their experience just might be a completely plausible, alternate version of your own story. Instead of feeling defensive, think of the *choose your own adventure* stories, and get ready to learn from a different reading of a familiar story.