

Wardley Mapping

A strategy tool created by Simon Wardley that turns strategy into an actual map. You chart the parts of your business on two axes: how visible each part is to the user (top to bottom) and how evolved it is (left to right, from brand-new to commodity). Like a map for a general, it shows where things are and where they're heading, so you can decide what to build, buy, or outsource.

Best for: Situational awareness · Build-vs-buy decisions · Tech & platform strategy · Spotting change

01 — AT A GLANCE

The heart of a Wardley map is the evolution axis: everything drifts left to right over time, from novel and rare to standardised and commoditised.



02 — THE CORE COMPONENTS

A Wardley map is built from a few simple ideas.

The User & Their Need	Every map starts at the top with the user and what they need. This 'anchor' keeps the whole strategy grounded in real demand.
The Value Chain (up-down)	Below the user sit the components needed to meet that need. Higher = more visible to the user; lower = invisible 'plumbing' like infrastructure.
Evolution (left-right) Genesis -> Custom -> Product -> Commodity	Each component's maturity: from brand-new and rare (Genesis), to tailor-made, to a defined Product, to a standard Commodity or utility.
Movement	Everything drifts left-to-right over time, pushed by supply and demand. Today's novelty becomes tomorrow's commodity, and that movement is the strategic insight.

Don't custom-build a commodity

The map's biggest payoff is build-vs-buy clarity. Innovate where things are new (Genesis); never hand-build what's becoming a commodity, just rent the utility. Like military leaders, business strategists make far better moves when they can actually see the landscape.

03 — WHEN TO USE IT & WHEN NOT TO

This framework isn't right for every situation. Used at the wrong moment, it can point you in the wrong direction.

✓ USE IT WHEN...	✗ DON'T USE WHEN...
- Understanding your landscape before making big bets - Deciding what to build in-house vs buy or outsource - Planning technology, platform or supply-chain strategy - Spotting where the ground is shifting under you	- For quick, simple decisions that don't need a full map - When you can't honestly define the user and value chain - As a one-off picture, it should evolve as the world does - Expecting precision, positions are 'about right', not exact

04 — IN ACTION

ShopSpring — Build It or Rent It?

ShopSpring, an online retailer, is about to spend a fortune building its own data centre and payment system. A Wardley map asks a sharper question: which of these is already a commodity?

How the framework was applied:

Step 1	Anchor on the user — Shoppers need to browse, pay and get orders; map the components that deliver this.
Step 2	Plot the value chain — The website is visible to users; servers, payments and hosting are invisible 'plumbing' beneath.
Step 3	Map evolution — Hosting and payments have become commodities (cloud, payment APIs); the personalised storefront is still evolving.
Step 4	Decide — Rent the commodities (cloud plus payment APIs) instead of building them; invest scarce effort in the storefront where it can differentiate.
Step 5	Result — ShopSpring avoids a costly, pointless data centre and focuses money where it actually wins.

The numbers at a glance

Risk Build all huge waste	Commodity Rent it cloud, payments	Genesis Build it the storefront	Saved Focus spend where it wins
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Why the map saved a fortune

Without a map, ShopSpring would have hand-built things the market already offers as cheap utilities. Seeing that hosting and payments were commodities, but the storefront was not, told it exactly what to rent and what to build. That's situational awareness in action.

05 — KEEP IN MIND

Even experienced teams slip up here. Keep these in mind to keep your analysis honest and useful.

1. Custom-building components that are already cheap commodities.

2. Drawing the map without anchoring it in a real user need.
3. Obsessing over exact positions, 'roughly right' is the goal.
4. Treating the map as static when everything keeps evolving.
5. Making it so complex nobody uses it, simple but used beats perfect.