

Creative Use Case Writing

Hüseyin Angay

Karabash Ltd.

Member of the Appropriate Process Movement

<http://www.aptprocess.com>

Abstract

Most use cases today are written in an environment of wilful ignorance, complete denial and wishful thinking. They bear less resemblance to reality than the script for The Terminator. The actors in The Terminator act in character, at least. Given the amount of fiction in them, use cases would benefit from a healthy dose of fiction writing techniques. I compiled some of these techniques to pep up your use cases. Even though there are no technical or business merits to any of this, at least you can entertain your readers, which is more than you can say about most of the use cases I read.

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Sensible Note

In case you've had a long day and all this appears to be genuine advice, please get some sleep and read this piece in the morning, when you will feel better and less gullible.

Creative Use Case Writing

Most use cases today are written in an environment of wilful ignorance, complete denial and wishful thinking. They bear less resemblance to reality than the script for *The Terminator*. The actors in *The Terminator* act in character, at least. Given the amount of fiction in them, use cases would benefit from a healthy dose of fiction writing techniques. I compiled some of these techniques to pep up your use cases. Even though there are no technical or business merits to any of this, at least you can entertain your readers, which is more than you can say about most of the use cases I read.

Anticipation

The most important aspect of any work of fiction is the sense of suspense and anticipation. This ensures that the reader wants to read further instead of putting the text down and reaching for the tv remote.

Keeping the levels of anticipation up in use cases is difficult but by no means impossible. The most common technique to achieve this is to hint at events in the future. You are telling the reader to hang on in there because something exciting is about to happen. Look at this fragment, for instance:

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot.
2. Machine beeps.
3. Machine returns the card.
4. Customer takes the card out.

This is so straightforward that the reader will fall asleep before step 4.

Try this instead:

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot, wondering what will happen next.
2. Machine beeps portending of looming doom.
3. Machine returns the card. What will the Customer do now?
4. Customer takes the card out.

Flashbacks are another common technique. In this case, the focus is not on a future event but on some past event that we have not fully revealed yet. Using the same use case:

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot with a sense of despair. He casts his mind back to that morning.
2. Machine beeps. It brings back memories of the microwave completing its cycle.
3. Machine returns the card.
4. Customer takes the card out.

The microwaves beeps.

5. Customer looks at the card's strip.

Customer opens the microwave door

6. Customer rubs at the strip with impotent rage.

Customer picks up the burning hot coffee mug and instantly drops it on his wallet. He'd left it by the microwave the night before.

By weaving the past and the present together, the writer achieved a sense of suspense that would never have happened with two separate and straightforward use cases.

When you come across included and extending use case fragments, try experimenting with this technique by weaving together the fragments and the concrete use case.

If flashbacks are a little too avant-garde to your taste, try a dose of classic whodunit.

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot.
2. Machine beeps.
3. Machine returns the card.
4. Customer takes the card out. How could that have happened to him?
(...)
104. Customer gathers Family in the dining room.
105. Customer rejects Butler as Butler had been on holiday.
106. Customer rejects Child as Child had been asleep.
107. Customer points to Dog.
108. Dog tries to hide behind Butler and Child.
109. Customer points to the tooth marks on the card.
110. Dog knows it is in big trouble.

Character building

However well you may keep the suspense going, your reader is not going to be interested in a use case without credible characters. Your actors need to be true to life to pass muster.

Start by describing your actors. The novice author does this in a business-like manner: All actors are thrown together in a package and given a description. This worked in 18th and 19th century novels, but today's readers are much more sophisticated. Nobody in his right mind is going to plough through three pages of this:

Customer:

The guy with the card.

Butler:

A divorcee from Southampton, currently making a living as a butler.

Child:

A four foot tall nursery school drop-out with a criminal record.

Machine:

The archenemy of Customer. Likes chewing up his cards.

etc.

For a start, it's too obvious. Besides, how much are you going to put here? You might as well write the whole requirements model in this chapter and be done with it.

Readers feel much more comfortable when they discover things about the characters bit by bit. It's also more entertaining.

1. Customer tosses his chestnut hair out of his eyes.
2. Customer inserts card into slot.
3. Machine blinks at Customer with hazel eyes.
4. Machine beeps in its usual machinely fashion.
5. Machine returns the card with a flourish that takes the Customer by surprise.
6. Customer takes the card out.
7. Machine laughs with that wicked laughter that often plagues Customer's nightmares.

See how we build up a description of the actors bit by bit while the story unravels itself?

Physical description is not all, though. Actors also need a character. Describe actors' inner selves by externalising their thoughts. Try to build up complex characters. Archetypes might just about work for cheap paperbacks, but only a grand master of can make them ring true. The rest of us can safely hide behind complex characters.

1. Customer looks apprehensive. He would like to be more assertive with Machine, but he is scared of it.
2. Machine wonders if Customer will ever get his act together. Machine smiles inwardly and decides he never will because he is such a coward.
3. Customer inserts the card into the slot with trembling hands.
4. Machine beeps making Customer jump.
5. Machine nods thoughtfully.
6. Machine's brow furrows with disappointment.
7. Machine returns the card.
8. Machine wonders if it is destined to this cycle of *take card, chew up and spit out*.
9. Customer takes the card out.
10. Tears well in Customer's eyes.

Here, we made Machine more human by giving it some conflicting thoughts. It may hate Customer, but would like to give him a break once in a while. It also finds the routine of its life depressing. In later use cases, we would build on this and show how Machine could break out of its mould and start a new life. This might even involve Customer in a less hostile environment. Character development is key to creative use case writing.

Notice how we sneaked in a little bit of empathy in step 10. We captured Customer's sadness and, for a moment, we made the reader feel for the actor. Judicious use of empathy with the main actors will make the reader want to find out more about them. So, they will be more likely to read on even through the difficult parts.

One thing that's missing from all the examples in this section so far is a past. The actors move around in a present, but we don't know where they came from. If we

don't know where they came from, how can we appreciate what they are doing? The old technique for doing this was a linear narrative, starting at some time in the past and ploughing on until we reach some point where the narrative ends. This was fine for character development, but a little too predictable. A better technique is to make frequent and small references to actors' past and their lives that are, at this moment, peripheral to the story but still relevant.

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot. He would have been here ten minutes earlier, if it hadn't been for that accident. Now, he is in a hurry.
2. Machine beeps. It had been having its breakfast this morning when it got a long distance call. The call disturbed it more than it would like to admit now.
3. Machine returns the card. This is the fifth today. What's wrong with all these Customers?
4. Customer takes the card out. He will need to hurry if he wants to catch his train.

Dialogue

This is probably the least understood part of creative use case writing. Real-life dialogue does not look natural on paper. You need to opt for a style that reads right instead of a style where you simply dump a real conversation on the page.

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot. "Damn you," he says. "Hurry up, will you?"
2. Machine beeps. "Dirili dirili dlip."
3. Machine returns the card. "So, Customer," it says, "what are you planning to do now?"
4. "So, it's come to this, then, eh Machine?" Customer says.
5. Customer takes the card out. "Meet me at the market square. Tomorrow. Noon. Bring a friend... If you have any left."
6. Machine laughs. "Hraw hah hah haw. I don't need any friends, Customer. And where I will be sending you, you won't have any, either. Tomorrow noon it shall be. See you there."

Now, this would be ok for a cheesy western, no doubt. We are aiming for a classier audience, though. Take a look at the following use case fragment.

1. Customer inserts the card into the slot. "Life can be harsh sometimes, don't you think?"
2. Machine beeps. "No doubt my friend. It's my destiny to observe many Customers' misfortune from this little corner of mine."
3. Machine returns the card. "And as you can see, yours seems no less harsh than the others'."
4. Customer takes the card out. "Couldn't you? Just this once?"
5. Machine blinks its screen. "Just this once? And what about tomorrow? And the day after? And what about all the other Customers? Anyway, do you think I have any choice on the matter?"

We managed to establish a character for the actors without any use of further devices. Customer is quickly shown to be a desperate man, looking for pity. Machine, on the other hand, is a compassionate but immovable character; it can sympathise with Customers, but it will not break the rules.

As you can see, dialogue brings use cases to life like no other technique. By judicious use of dialogue, we can quickly establish the direction of the use case and the motivations of the characters.

Scene setting

So far, our actors have been going about their business in some ethereal environment. We don't know where they are or what their surroundings look like. This ambiguity may work for an experimental piece of poetry, but it has no place in story telling. Our actors need a platform to put their actions in context.

1. A wind out of nowhere whips up some crisp packets and blows them about.
2. Dust devils appear and then disappear just as quickly before Customer can focus on them.
3. Customer walks up the concrete steps covered in the sand from yesterday's storm.
4. Customer inserts the card into the slot.
5. Machine beeps.
6. The beeps echo down the empty street.
7. Machine returns the card.
8. Customer takes the card out.
9. A slow rain starts raising dust craters on the dry pavement.

This use case fragment captures a desolate atmosphere. Naturally, we could have established a better mood by talking about sunshine and butterflies or we could have surrounded Customer and Machine with crowds.

Metaphor

Plain textual descriptions of actors and actions soon become tiresome. Human mind is not equipped to handle so much dry text. Metaphors help break up the text into more manageable chunks and they express some complex concepts much better than a straightforward explanation.

1. Customer inserts the card into the hungrily gaping mouth.
2. Machine buzzes like an angry wasps' nest.
3. Machine returns the card as if the mere touch of it could contaminate.
4. Customer pulls the embodiment of all his despair from the clutches of Machine.

Here, rather than directly referring to an air of menace from the machine, we implied it through the metaphors. You must agree that this is much more entertaining for the reader than saying, "Machine has a menacing air today."

Mixing the techniques

The examples were naturally concentrating on a single aspect at a time. Here is a use case that makes use of all the techniques at once.

1. A wind out of nowhere whips up some crisp packets and blows them about.
2. Dust devils appear and then disappear just as quickly before Customer can focus on them.
3. Customer walks up the concrete steps covered in the sand from yesterday's storm.
4. Customer tosses his chestnut hair out of his eyes.
5. Customer looks apprehensive. He would like to be more assertive with Machine, but he is scared of it.
6. Machine wonders if Customer will ever get his act together. Machine smiles inwardly and decides he never will because he is such a coward.

7. Customer, hands trembling, inserts the card into the hungrily gaping mouth with a sense of despair, wondering what will happen next. He casts his mind back to that morning. He would have been here ten minutes earlier, if it hadn't been for that accident. Now, he is in a hurry. "Damn you," he says. "Hurry up, will you?"
8. Customer adds philosophically. "Life can be harsh sometimes, don't you think?"
9. Machine blinks at Customer with hazel eyes.
10. Machine buzzes like an angry wasps' nest making Customer jump in its usual machinely fashion portending of looming doom. "Dirili dirili dlip." The beeps echo down the empty street. The beep brings back to Customer memories of the microwave completing its cycle. Machine, on the other hand, had been having its breakfast this morning when it got a long distance call. The call disturbed it more than it would like to admit now.
11. Machine says, "No doubt my friend. It's my destiny to observe many Customers' misfortune from this little corner of mine."
12. Machine nods thoughtfully.
13. Machine's brow furrows with disappointment.
14. Machine returns the card as if the mere touch of it could contaminate. It still does this with a flourish that takes the Customer by surprise. "So, Customer," it says, "what are you planning to do now?" What will the Customer do now? This is the fifth today. What's wrong with all these Customers?
15. Machine adds, "As you can see, your life seems no less harsh than the others'."
16. Machine wonders if it is destined to this cycle of *take card, chew up and spit out*.
17. "So, it's come to this, then, eh Machine?" Customer says.
18. Customer pulls the embodiment of all his despair from the clutches of Machine. How could that have happened to him? He will need to hurry if he wants to catch his train. "Couldn't you? Just this once?"

The microwaves beeps.

19. Tears well in Customer's eyes.
20. Customer looks at the card's strip.
Customer opens the microwave door
21. Customer rubs at the strip with impotent rage.

Customer picks up the burning hot coffee mug and instantly drops it on his wallet. He'd left it by the microwave the night before.

22. Machine laughs with that wicked laughter that often plagues Customer's nightmares.
23. Machine blinks its screen. "Just this once? And what about tomorrow? And the day after? And what about all the other Customers? Anyway, do you think I have any choice on the matter?"
24. Customer says "Meet me at the market square. Tomorrow. Noon. Bring a friend... If you have any left."
25. Machine laughs. "Hraw hah hah haw. I don't need any friends, Customer. And where I will be sending you, you won't have any, either. Tomorrow noon it shall be. See you there."
26. A slow rain starts raising dust craters on the dry pavement.

(...)

104. Customers gathers Family in the dining room.
105. Customer rejects Butler as Butler had been on holiday.
106. Customer rejects Child as Child had been asleep.
107. Customer points to Dog.
108. Dog tries to hide behind Butler and Child.
109. Customer points to the tooth marks on the card.
110. Dog knows it is in big trouble.

The expression *dog's dinner* comes to mind after reading the above piece. At least, it might give the reader a chuckle or two. How many of us can proudly claim that our use cases bring a smile to the face of our readers?

The more observant will notice that the full example made extensive use of the previous example use case fragments. Look out for the upcoming whitepaper on why re-use is considered harmful. On reflection, the example says it all, really.