Clarity and Precision: Two Approaches to Better Use-Case Descriptions

An Introduction by Kurt Bittner

The heart of the use case -- a proven technique for ensuring that the system you build will do what the customer wants it to do -- is a detailed, written description of the system's expected behavior. Often, however, the details seem to "get in the way," making it difficult to understand what the system is really supposed to do. For authors of use cases, it can be challenging to strike precisely the right balance between clarity and precision; fortunately, there are strategies and techniques that can help.

The two articles in this special subsection describe two different techniques that can be used either separately or together to reduce the complexity and improve the clarity of detailed use-case descriptions. The article by Kurt Bittner, "Managing Use-Case Details," discusses the use of glossaries and domain models as a way to present background information, information requirements, and even business rules. By using these techniques, a designer can hide supporting detail but still ensure that important information is captured.

The article by Ben Lieberman, "UML Activity Diagrams: Versatile Roadmaps for Understanding System Behavior," describes how to use Activity Diagrams, which are specified in The Rational Unified Process, to visually represent complex flows of events within use cases. This technique can be used in addition to, and in support of, textual use-case descriptions to make these event flows easier to understand.

When used in appropriate circumstances, these two techniques provide system designers with simple but powerful ways to manage the presentation of details in use-case descriptions.

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