WEB-BASED SIMULATION EXPERIMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The use of the World Wide Web and Java-based mobile code provides new opportunities for distributed simulation. First, the infrastructure provided by the Internet eliminates the need for multiprocessor hardware, making it feasible to distribute simulation models over different hardware platforms through the Internet. Second, "Internet-aware" mobile Java code makes the applications fully portable and reusable. These enabling technologies are already exploited for distributed simulation modeling. This paper reports on the preliminary results of an on-going effort to construct a parallel discrete event simulation support system to distribute simulation experiments over the Internet with a view on simulation optimization. A research prototype for ranking and selection problems is described. The overall project goals are discussed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Man-made systems such as manufacturing and service facilities, computer networks, and transportation systems are typically complex systems that are expensive to build and operate. The design of such systems, typically referred to as "discrete event systems" (DES), therefore require careful performance analysis. In a DES, the system changes state in an asynchronous fashion at (typically) random points in time. For example, a job might be submitted to a computer system, requesting a certain type of service. The system then reacts to this event in order to satisfy the request. While the design concerns may focus on system capacity, i.e., the number of jobs that can be handled in a fixed time period, operational problems may be concerned with the dynamic handling of incoming jobs so as to minimize average response time. Given the inherent complexity of such systems, computer simulation is used for modeling and performance assessment of DES. Computer simulation is a flexible modeling tool in that simulation models can accommodate arbitrary levels of system detail. Simulation is also an attractive analysis tool since simulation experiments are typically less costly than other experimental approaches.

Increased levels of detail in simulation models (e.g., explicit representation of an increasing number of resources such as people, machines, tools, and jobs in manufacturing models), considerably higher levels of activity in the modeled system (e.g., millions of messages to be handled by a telecommunications network), and significantly improved levels of reliability of modeled systems (e.g., a highly reliable ticket reservation computer) are straining the effectiveness of simulation experiments.

Various schemes have been proposed to enhance the effectiveness of simulation experiments. On the modeling side, alternative modeling approaches have been introduced to reduce the inherent complexity of models either by implicitly representing most system entities (Yücesan and Schruben 1993) or by reducing the size of the state space of the underlying model (Kang and Lee 1994). On the analysis side, various approaches have been introduced to improve the statistical efficiency of simulation experiments (Wilson 1984, Glynn and Iglehart 1989, and Chen et al. 1996). Finally, parallel execution algorithms have been developed for run time speed up. There are several approaches to exploiting parallelism in discrete event simulation:

- **Dedicated execution.** This is the approach where dedicated functional units execute specific sequential simulation functions such as random number generation, future events list management, and statistics collection (Comfort 1984).

- **Hierarchical decomposition.** This is the approach where the simulation model is decomposed in a hierarchical fashion so as to allow an event consisting of several sub-events to be processed concurrently (Concepcion 1989).

- **Parallel replication.** This is the approach where several replications of a sequential simulation are executed independently on different processors (Heidelberger 1988).
• **Parallel execution.** This is the execution of a simulation model on a parallel computer by decomposing the simulation model implementation into a set of concurrently executing processes (Misra 1986).

Dedicated execution and hierarchical decomposition exploit the cost advantage of microcomputers and high-bandwidth lines by partitioning the simulation problem and executing the parts in parallel. There are, however, inherent drawbacks in each of the approaches. In dedicated execution, the speedup tends to be very limited, as the management of the future events list becomes the bottleneck. The performance improvement in hierarchical decomposition is largely model-dependent. For example, some queueing network models have been successfully simulated in a distributed fashion by simulating each queueing node on a separate processor. For other models, however, decomposing the model for parallel execution is not trivial. Som and Sargent (1989) propose a conceptual algorithm for hierarchical decomposition. Lin (1992) introduces algorithms for critical path analysis aimed at uncovering inherent parallelism in simulation models.

In parallel replication, each processor must contain sufficient memory to hold the entire simulation model. This is becoming less of a constraint with the rapid advances in hardware. Nevertheless, one important problem remains: if one desires to distribute the experiment, where the results of one replication are used to determine which run to execute next, the execution of the overall experiment becomes once again sequential.

The application of parallel discrete event simulation (PDES) has therefore been limited. Until recently, parallel computers could be found only in research laboratories or large universities. Furthermore, system software to support large-scale distributed simulations remains scarce. Under these circumstances, the simulation community has largely been reluctant to explore the potential gains offered by this technology. In fact, this lack of acceptance by the simulation community has recently triggered a heated discussion about the future of PDES (Fujimoto 1993).

We view the Internet and the web-based technologies as key enablers for conducting large-scale distributed simulation experiments. Our research is aimed at developing a scalable software architecture that would support PDES. This paper describes the research prototype of such a software architecture. This architecture will ultimately be used to investigate the impact of the Internet and web-based technologies on PDES with a particular focus on the design of distributed simulation experiments and simulation optimization. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the implementation platform. Section 3 provides an example of parallel replication schemes for ranking and selection in which computational effort is allocated dynamically to competing designs in an intelligent fashion (Chen et al 1996). Section 4 briefly describes the on-going work in this domain and the overall goals of the research initiative.

### 2 IMPLEMENTATION PLATFORM

There exist several Java-based distributed simulation platforms (Page et al. 1997). These platforms, however, focus almost exclusively on distributed modeling or parallel execution of a single simulation replication rather than full-scale experimentation and optimization.

Infrastructure for Distributed Enterprise Simulation, IDES, (Nicol et al. 1997) is a parallel simulation framework for large-scale enterprise simulations. More specifically, IDES is a simulation tool for analyzing complex system models to discover the collective behavior of the system through the interaction of detailed individual sub-model simulations. Such an experiment is typically referred to as **enterprise simulation.** Enterprise simulation necessitates the interoperability of models constructed under different formalisms such as discrete event models and differential equations. Since our focus is on the simulation of DES, the functionality of the proposed software system need not be as far reaching as that of IDES. However, IDES's capability of coordinating the execution of independent sub-models serves as a crucial benchmark for the coordination of distributed simulation experiments.

Multimodeling Object-Oriented Simulation Environment, MOOSE, (Fishwick 1997) is a modeling environment that supports the development of models under various formalisms and the sharing of those models through a web-based environment. MOOSE focuses on object-oriented modeling and promotes the possibility of integrating those models seamlessly with others found in model repositories throughout the Internet. In developing our software architecture, we follow the model management protocols and web interfacing approaches deployed by MOOSE.

We develop a PDES Support System to coordinate the execution of distributed simulation experiments, as illustrated in Figure 1. The research prototype of the PDES Support System possesses the following capabilities:

@ **Site i:** The site, a personal computer or a workstation, is equipped with a web browser which supports the Internet communication protocols (TCP/IP). The communication infrastructure is crucial in managing the messages during the parallel execution of a simulation replication.
The PDES Support System: This is a central platform on the host machine that plans parallel simulation experiments and dynamically manages their execution. Via the Internet, the system has access to a (large) number of sites, which can be dynamically selected to execute a parallel replication as part of an experimental design. Further technical details on the Experiment Planner (OCBA) are provided in Section 3.

The system also has data collection and analysis capabilities. Output data from each individual processor are collected and analyzed to decide what other replications to run and where to execute the additional replications. In this setting, scalability implies the dynamic deployment of any number of processors as required by the experimental plan.

Finally, the system contains a reporting mechanism which compiles and presents the results of the parallel experiment. The reports will ultimately be in a multimedia format, consisting of tabular and graphical summaries as well as brief animations of the underlying simulation model to depict the dynamic behavior of the system.

We should point out that both the World Wide Web and the Java-based technologies already offer a set of capabilities to facilitate web-based simulation. Key features of web technology include (Ferscha and Richter 1997):

- Transparency of network heterogeneity: Interoperability of different networks is achieved through well-defined, standardized protocols such as HTTP and CGI. The HTTP protocol defines a uniform information transport mechanism, while CGI establishes the interface between a web server and arbitrary programs executing on the same machine.

- Transparency of operating system heterogeneity: The Java virtual machine, a platform-neutral architecture definition, provides a uniform processing environment due to its integration into standard web browsers.

- Transparency of user interface heterogeneity: Along with Java, a class library for user interface programming now exists to support standardized concepts for graphical interfaces. Dynamic retrieval of classes from the net, run-time linking, significantly enriches user interfaces.

The dynamic web environment raises questions on such crucial issues as network congestion, communication reliability, and network security. The immediate objective of our work is to establish the feasibility of Internet-based approaches to distribute simulation experiments with an emphasis on stochastic optimization. Our first concern is therefore capability rather than run-time performance. Issues of portability, maintainability, and conformance to standards are crucial in demonstrating the feasibility of PDES over the Internet. Our second concern is execution
speed, which will be addressed both by designing intelligent
distribution algorithms and by taking advantage of emerging
techniques aimed at speeding up communication over the
Internet.

3 A RESEARCH PROTOTYPE

In addition to distributing model execution and
experimentation, we use the parallel environment in
distributing simulation optimization algorithms such as rapid
learning (Cassandras 1993) and optimal computing budget
allocation (Chen et al. 1996). These optimization algorithms
have thus far been tested on sequential computing
environments, while significant speed up can be obtained
through parallel execution.

This paper focuses on optimal computing budget
allocation (OCBA), which is a scheme aimed at improving
the efficiency of ranking and selection procedures in
simulation. Chen et al. (1996) formulate the procedure of
selecting the best design as an optimization problem, which
optimally allocates a computing budget and processors to the
designs under evaluation. Denote $SQ$ as the overall
simulation quality. Examples of $SQ$ include the mean
squared error of the performance measure or the probability
of correctly selecting the true best design. Also denote by $N_i$
the number of simulation replications for design $i$ and by $k$
the total number of alternative designs. If the simulation
experiment is executed sequentially on a single processor,
the budget allocation problem can be expressed as:

$$\max_{N_1, \ldots, N_k} SQ$$

\[ \text{s.t. } N_1 + N_2 + \cdots + N_k = B, \]

where $B$ is the given computing budget. Chen et al. (1996)
present a solution technique to this budget allocation
problem. The underlying ideas are as follows. Intuitively,
some inferior designs can be discarded at an early stage of
the simulation experiment. As the experiments proceed,
other designs can be further ignored when higher simulation
accuracy for the remaining designs is obtained. This
procedure is repeated until a desired probability of correct
selection is achieved. In doing so, less computational effort
is spent on simulating inferior designs and, hence, the
overall simulation time is reduced. Ideally, we want to
optimally choose the number of simulation replications for
all designs to minimize the total simulation cost, while
obtaining the desired correct selection probability. The
question is therefore equivalent to optimally decide which
designs will receive additional computing budget for
continuing the simulation further or to find an optimal way
to reach an optimal design.

Preliminary tests indicate that the proposed technique is
significantly faster than the traditional two-stage procedures
(Dudewicz and Dalal 1975 and Rinott 1977) for a 10-design
G/G/1 queueing system. Furthermore, this technique
provides an optimal way to reach an optimal design.

Our research prototype extends the idea of optimal
budget allocation to multiple-processor environments. The
budget allocation technique can effectively manage limited
computing resources, including a limited number of
computers and/or computation time. This technique is
extended to the multiple-processor environment in the
following way: For a single-processor environment, the
improvement in the probability of correct selection if design $i$
is simulated is evaluated for all $i$'s. Then the design with
maximum estimated correct selection probability improvement is chosen to perform the simulation. A quick
approach for the case of having $m$ processors is that we
select $m$ design alternatives for further simulation each time.
To maximize actual correct selection probability, we select
those $m$ designs which have top-$m$ estimated improvement
of correct selection probability.

Example: For illustration, a two-station tandem
queueing network is considered. The customers arrive to the
first station with an interarrival time distributed uniformly.
The design alternatives are concerned with the selection of
servers for the two stations. Since the performance measure
of interest is the average sojourn time, high service rates are
desirable. We consider twelve designs, where design #12
provides the fastest service, hence, minimizes the average
sojourn time. The user interface of a representative run is
shown in Figure 2.

The current implementation, which focuses on
feasibility, distributes the execution of the individual threads
over a group of available servers. Initially, each design
alternative is run for a fixed number of replications. Each
replication is executed as an individual thread. Once the
execution of a thread is completed, the simulation output is
returned to the Experiment Planner in the PDES Support
System to update the approximate probability of correct
selection (APCS) using a Bayesian framework. This
probability is then used to allocate further computation
budget (i.e., additional number of replications) to competing
design alternatives. Once the additional number of
replications is determined, the new threads are assigned to
available servers for further execution. The procedure is
repeated until the APCS achieves the desired value.

For further gains in efficiency, we are currently moving
toward a scheme of predicting the $m$ designs that have the
greatest combined improvement of APCS. This approach
moves beyond finding the "top $m$" designs, as we would be
analyzing their impact as a group, rather than their individual
contribution.
4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper reports on the preliminary results of an on-going effort to construct a PDES Support System to distribute simulation experiments over the Internet with a view on simulation optimization. A research prototype for a ranking and selection problem is described.

We believe that the use of the World Wide Web and Java-based mobile code as the enabling technologies will provide a breakthrough for distributed simulation. First, the infrastructure provided by the Internet eliminates the need for multiprocessor hardware. It is already feasible to distribute simulation models over different hardware platforms through the Internet. Second, “Internet-aware” mobile Java code makes the applications fully portable and reusable.

The ultimate goal of this research initiative is to develop a scalable software architecture that would support parallel experimentation with discrete event simulation models. This architecture will then be used to explore the impact of the Internet and web-based technologies on parallel discrete event simulation with a particular focus on the design of distributed simulation experiments and simulation optimization.

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REFERENCES


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