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Massey University
School of Science
Institute of Technology and Engineering

A Distributed Shop Floor Control System Based on the Principles of Heterarchical Control and Multi Agent Paradigm

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
PhD degree
in
Production Technology – Computer Integrated Manufacturing (CIM) Systems
at
Massey University

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Preface

In progressive firms, major efforts are underway to reduce the time to design, manufacture, and deliver products. The programs have a variety of objectives, from reducing lead-time to increasing product quality. The process of improvement starts with customer requirements, which in turn lead to customer-driven manufacturing, incorporating customer requirements more directly into the manufacturing processes. Forecasting customer requirements has not become any easier, in fact, just the contrary. The implication is clear: that if demands cannot be forecast, the manufacturing function must be designed to respond to these demands. To do this rapidly, more and more of the manufacturing decisions are being delegated to the factory floor. To paraphrase; the customer is saying what is to be made, the due date is now, and the work force is figuring out how to do it online. As the manufacturing world moves toward the “zero everything” vision of the future (zero inventory, zero set-up time, zero defects, zero waste), fundamental changes will take place in the factory. These changes will necessitate changes in manufacturing planning and control systems and particularly changes in planning and control on the shop floor level. This dissertation addresses the possible direction that some of these changes might take on the shop floor.

The starting preamble of this research is that forecasting in certain type of manufacturing systems is not possible. An example might be systems in which product orders arrive randomly, such as manufacturing facilities involved in production of replacement spare parts). Additionally, in many other manufacturing systems, forecasting generates results that are of a very low level of certainty. In many occasions they are practically useless, since they are applicable only for short time horizons. As an example, small-quantity batch manufacturing systems usually operate under conditions where frequent disturbances make this production unstable at all times. Therefore, addressing these systems, the main idea embodied in this dissertation could be expressed as follows: *“Instead of focusing efforts on how to improve the old, or develop new methods for controlling material flows in manufacturing systems, methods that are solely based on the main premise of predicting the future circumstances, this research takes another course. It considers an alternative approach – developing of manufacturing control mechanisms that are “more reactive” to the changes in the systems and “less dependant on prediction” of future events.*

It is believed that the modern job shop manufacturing facilities, such as mentioned above, can further increase their competitiveness by adopting approaches for shop floor control systems that are discussed in this research study. This is because the proposed system is capable, both dynamically and in real time, of promptly responding to frequent changes in production conditions, always attempting to find the best possible solution for given circumstances.

The embodied philosophy in this project for resolving computationally difficult and complex scheduling problems in manufacturing systems is not new. However, it introduces a concept and methodology that makes development of a distributed multi-agent system a reality. It does so by using common hardware, computer operating and network systems, and programming languages and technologies. A developed test-bed application that can run on theoretically unlimited number of computers connected into a local area network (LAN), demonstrates the work of distributed multi agent systems, and proves that such a system can be developed using common computer hardware and software technologies, in a very affordable, and inexpensive way.

This dissertation represents yet another effort in the vast research endeavour directed towards the building of competitive manufacturing facilities. If any part of this work is going to be used for these purposes in the future and serve as a small contribution to this endeavour, the author will consider this study successful.

Table of Contents

A list of figures..... XV

A list of tables..... XVII

Abstract..... XIX

Chapter 1. Introduction..... 1-1

1.1 Preliminary remarks..... 1-1

1.2. Motivation for conducting this research project..... 1-5

1.3. Research domain..... 1-8

1.4. The manufacturing systems targeted in this research..... 1-10

1.5. The structure of thesis..... 1-13

Chapter 2. Overview of traditional manufacturing systems..... 2-1

2.1 Defining the technological structure of a manufacturing system..... 2-1

2.2.1 A brief review of development of manufacturing systems with emphasis on job shop production..... 2-2

2.1.2 Importance of batch production..... 2-5

2.1.2.1 Some advantages and disadvantages of job shop systems and batch production..... 2-6

2.1.2.2 Attempts to overcome issues related to batch production..... 2-6

2.1.3 A desirable structure for a model of manufacturing system..... 2-7

2.1.3.1 Characteristics of the adopted model of manufacturing system..... 2-8

Chapter 3. Production Planning and Control system – traditional approaches..... 3-1

3.1 General framework for a Production Planning and Control system..... 3-2

3.2 The importance of a Production Planning and Control system..... 3-6

3.3 Integrated - traditional - approaches to Production Planning and Control..... 3-7

3.3.1 Materials Requirements Planning (MRP)..... 3-8

3.3.2 Manufacturing Resource Planning (MRP-II)..... 3-9

3.3.3 Just-In-Time (JIT)..... 3-11

3.4 Summary of conventional approaches in the design of Production Planning and Control systems.....	3-12
3.5 Traditional approaches to Shop Floor Control (SFC) systems.....	3-13
3.5.1 Comments on Shop Floor Control system under MRP/MRP II.....	3-14
3.6 A list of desirable features of manufacturing control systems.....	3-15
3.7 Overcoming issues of conventional Shop Floor Control systems.....	3-16
Chapter 4. Production scheduling.....	4-1
4.1 Introduction.....	4-2
4.2 A scheduling framework.....	4-3
4.2.1 Definitions of scheduling.....	4-3
4.2.1.1 Why the scheduling problem is difficult?.....	4-4
4.2.1.2 Reducing the scheduling problem.....	4-5
4.2.2 Scheduling objectives.....	4-6
4.2.3 Performance criteria.....	4-6
4.2.3.1 Evaluation strategies.....	4-8
4.2.4 Product structure.....	4-8
4.3 An overview of some scheduling techniques.....	4-9
4.3.1 Optimisation procedures.....	4-9
4.3.2 Approximation methods.....	4-11
4.3.2.1 Enumerative methods.....	4-11
4.3.2.2 Priority Dispatch Rules (PDR).....	4-12
4.3.2.3 Artificial Intelligence.....	4-13
4.3.2.3.1 <i>Constraint propagation</i>	4-14
4.3.2.3.2 <i>Neural networks</i>	4-14
4.3.2.3.3 <i>Distributed scheduling</i>	4-14
4.3.2.4 Bottleneck based heuristic.....	4-14
4.3.2.5 Local search methods and Meta-heuristics - Stochastic search.....	4-15
4.3.2.5.1 <i>Beam search</i>	4-15
4.3.2.5.2 <i>The simulated annealing optimisation technique</i>	4-15
4.3.2.5.3 <i>The tabu search technique</i>	4-16
4.3.2.5.4 <i>The genetic algorithm</i>	4-16
4.4 A review of some simulation studies related to traditional scheduling techniques.....	4-17
4.4.1 The one machine case.....	4-17
4.4.2 The two and three machine case.....	4-17

4.4.3 Scheduling in Job-shop Flexible Manufacturing Systems.....	4-18
4.4.4 Concluding comments on classical scheduling research.....	4-21
4.5 Emergence of distributed scheduling.....	4-22
Chapter 5. The new generation of manufacturing systems.....	5-1
5.1 Introduction.....	5-1
5.2 Virtual organisations.....	5-2
5.2.1 The Web-Centric paradigm.....	5-2
5.2.2 The Virtual Enterprise paradigm.....	5-2
5.3 Main requirements of the new generation of manufacturing control systems.....	5-3
5.4 Overview of manufacturing control architectures and their main characteristics.....	5-5
5.4.1 Centralised control architectures.....	5-6
5.4.2 Hierarchical control architectures.....	5-6
5.4.3 Heterarchical control architectures.....	5-7
5.5 Agent technology.....	5-9
5.6 Emergence of new paradigms.....	5-10
5.6.1 Bionic Manufacturing Systems (BMS).....	5-10
5.6.2 Fractal Factories (FF).....	5-11
5.6.3 Holonic Manufacturing Systems (HMS).....	5-13
5.6.3.1 Roots.....	5-13
5.6.3.2 First steps in development of Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-14
5.6.3.3 Holon architecture.....	5-15
5.6.3.4 Key characteristics of Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-16
5.6.3.5 Goal of Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-16
5.6.3.6 Some conclusions from the brief review of Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-16
5.6.4 Comparison of concepts.....	5-17
5.6.5 Some remarks related to the review on new paradigms.....	5-18
5.7 Comparison between Multi-Agent Systems and Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-18
5.7.1 Similarities between Multi-Agent Systems and Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-18
5.7.2 Differences between Multi-Agent Systems and Holonic Manufacturing Systems.....	5-19
5.7.3 Holonic Manufacturing Systems and Multi-Agent Systems integration.....	5-20

5.8 Design principles for highly distributed heterarchical Shop Floor Control systems.....	5-21
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Chapter 6. A review of research on Multi-Agent Systems.....

6.1 What is an agent?.....	6-2
6.1.1 Agent definitions.....	6-2
6.1.2 Common agent properties.....	6-4
6.1.3 A few agent classification schemes.....	6-4
6.1.4 Individual agent architecture.....	6-6
6.2 Coordination among multi-agents.....	6-6
6.2.1 Communication strategies.....	6-7
6.2.2 Different kinds of negotiation.....	6-7
6.2.3 Coordination mechanisms.....	6-8
6.2.3.1 The Contract-Net Protocol.....	6-9
6.2.2.1.1 <i>Distributed problem solving - basic definitions</i>	6-10
6.3.2.1.2 <i>The Contract-Net Protocol – details</i>	6-11
6.3.2.1.3 <i>The Common Inter-node Language</i>	6-13
6.3 Agents in manufacturing systems.....	6-13
6.3.1 Why use agents in manufacturing systems?.....	6-14
6.3.2 Types of agents and their application.....	6-15
6.3.3 How agents are connected?.....	6-16
6.3.4 Multi-agent architectures in manufacturing control systems.....	6-17
6.3.4.1 Hierarchical structure.....	6-17
6.3.4.2 Heterarchical structures.....	6-18
6.3.4.3 Hybrid structures.....	6-19
6.3.5 Scheduling in distributed multi-agent heterarchical control systems.....	6-19
6.3.5.1 Agent-based dynamic scheduling.....	6-20
6.3.6 Some advantages and disadvantages of applying Multi-Agent Systems in manufacturing.....	6-23
6.3.6.1 Benefits of distributed, multi-agent, heterarchical architectures.....	6-23
6.3.6.1.1 <i>Reduction of the complexity of scheduling problems</i>	6-23
6.3.6.1.2 <i>Ability to achieve Real-time scheduling</i>	6-24
6.3.6.1.3 <i>Increased flexibility</i>	6-24
6.3.6.1.4 <i>Increased fault-tolerance</i>	6-25
6.3.6.1.5 <i>Reduction of software related costs - reduction of overall size and complexity of the production planning and control system</i>	6-25

6.3.6.1.6 Increased system responsiveness.....	6-25
6.3.6.1.7 Increased utilisation of system resources.....	6-26
6.3.6.1.8 The ability to control large manufacturing systems.....	6-26
6.3.6.1.9 The ability to deal with partial information.....	6-26
6.3.6.2 The main drawbacks of distributed heterarchical control systems.....	6-26
6.3.6.2.1 Prediction of how the system will behave can be made only at the aggregate not at the individual level.....	6-26
6.3.6.2.2 Theoretical optima cannot be guaranteed.....	6-26
6.3.6.2.3 System of autonomous agents can become computationally unstable	6-27
6.4 Overview of standards and tools for developing Multi-Agent Systems.....	6-27
6.4.1 Agent standards.....	6-27
6.4.1.1 FIPA.....	6-28
6.4.1.2 MASIF.....	6-29
6.4.2 Agent development platforms.....	6-29
6.4.2.1 FIPA-OS.....	6-30
6.4.2.2 JADE.....	6-30
6.4.2.3 ZEUS.....	6-30
6.4.3 Agent languages.....	6-31
6.4.4 Content (representation) languages - ontologies.....	6-32
6.5 Some concluding comments on Multi-Agent Systems.....	6-33
Chapter 7. The problem statement, the goals, and the research objectives.....	7-1
7.1 Introduction.....	7-1
7.2 A retrospective discussion on relevant background material.....	7-2
7.3 Some points that influenced design of the system.....	7-5
7.4 Problem statement.....	7-5
7.5 The research goals.....	7-6
7.6 The research objectives.....	7-7
7.7 Concluding comments.....	7-9
Chapter 8. Description of the manufacturing system model.....	8-1
8.1 A modelling framework.....	8-1
8.1.1 Components of the manufacturing system model.....	8-2
8.1.2 Other preliminaries.....	8-4

8.1.3 Integration of the process planning and shop floor scheduling and control functions.....	8-6
8.1.4 The proposed manufacturing system structure – a general description of the manufacturing system resource model.....	8-7
8.1.4.1 Workstations.....	8-8
8.1.4.2 Jobs and operations.....	8-9
8.1.4.3 Transport of materials between workstations.....	8-10
8.1.4.4 Cutting tools, jigs and fixtures.....	8-11
8.1.5 Relationships in the proposed manufacturing system model.....	8-11
8.1.6 Manufacturing model characteristics.....	8-12
Chapter 9. The selection of a development platform.....	9-1
9.1 The choice of tools for the development of a test-bed application of a distributed, heterarchical shop floor control system.....	9-1
9.1.1 The selection of computers.....	9-1
9.1.2 The selection of an operating system.....	9-1
9.1.3 The selection of a network.....	9-2
9.1.4 The selection of Network Interface Cards.....	9-3
9.1.5 The selection of programming tools.....	9-3
Chapter 10. Design, development, and implementation of a model of a distributed heterarchical shop floor control system.....	10-1
10.1 The proposed control architecture of a heterarchical shop floor control system.....	10-1
10.2 The workstation agent.....	10-5
10.2.1 The functional model of the workstation agent.....	10-5
10.2.1.1 The local knowledge database.....	10-5
10.2.1.2 The communication module.....	10-8
10.2.1.2.1 The sub-modules for sending messages - the client application.....	10-11
10.2.1.2.2 The sub-modules for receiving messages - the server application...	10-11
10.2.1.3 The decision-making module.....	10-13
10.2.1.4 The workstation control module.....	10-14
10.2.2 Co-operation and communication between workstation agents – the implemented negotiation mechanism.....	10-15
10.2.2.1 The analogy between Task Sharing in distributed problem solving, and Task Allocation in manufacturing.....	10-16
10.2.2.2 The structure of messages.....	10-17
10.2.2.2.1 A Task Announcement message.....	10-17

10.2.2.2.2 A Bid message.....	10-18
10.2.2.2.3 An Award message.....	10-19
10.2.2.2.4 An Acknowledgement message.....	10-19
10.3 Scheduling in the model of a distributed heterarchical shop floor control system.....	10-19
10.3.1 Global scheduling - scheduling among workstation agents.....	10-20
10.3.2 Local scheduling - scheduling methods for each individual production workstation agent.....	10-22
Chapter 11. How the heterarchical shop floor control system works? – The operation of the manufacturing system model.....	11-1
11.1 The assembly of the demonstration system and the creation of an experimental Local Area Network (LAN).....	11-1
11.2 The operation of the demonstration system.....	11-3
11.2.1 Pre-process activities - the system input workstation.....	11-3
11.2.1.1 Fixing a work-part on a pallet.....	11-7
11.2.1.2 Getting the Processing Route Table (PRT).....	11-7
11.2.1.3 Supplying production workstations with processing data.....	11-8
11.2.2 Activities during the production process.....	11-9
11.2.2.1 Generating a task announcement and sending it to the destination agents.....	11-9
11.2.2.2 Forming bids and sending them back to the source agent.....	11-13
11.2.2.3 Selection of the winning bid and the generation of an award message....	11-14
11.2.2.4 Booking the workstation capacities and generating an acknowledgement message.....	11-15
11.2.2.5 Dispatching of a work-part.....	11-15
11.2.2.6 Arrival of a work-part on the destination workstation.....	11-16
11.2.2.7 Main algorithms related to the negotiation process.....	11-16
11.2.2.8 Flow of work-parts inside the workstation.....	11-16
11.2.3 Post-process activities – the system output workstation.....	11-19
11.3 Demonstration to the New Technology Development Operations Group.....	11-19
11.4 Summary.....	11-20
Chapter 12. Discussion of results.....	12-1
12.1 A retrospective view of the research objectives.....	12-1
12.1.1 A job shop manufacturing system reference model.....	12-1
12.1.2 A heterarchical shop floor control reference model.....	12-2

12.1.3 Requirements of distributed heterarchical control systems.....	12-3
12.1.4 Methodology for resolving real-time scheduling and resource allocation problems.....	12-4
12.1.5 The information that is required for making rapid and effective scheduling decisions.....	12-4
12.1.6 A mechanism that links process planning and scheduling functions.....	12-5
12.1.7 Analysis and distribution of manufacturing data among workstation agents.....	12-5
12.1.8 Definition of messages that provide efficient negotiation processes between workstation agents.....	12-6
12.1.9 Selection of a computer platform and software technology.....	12-7
12.1.10 Design and development of the workstation agent.....	12-8
12.1.11 Demonstration of a test-bed network application on an experimental LAN.....	12-10
12.1.12 Similarities with the holonic approach.....	12-13
12.1.13 Some advantages of the proposed systems in comparison with traditional shop floor control systems.....	12-13
12.2 Contribution of the study.....	12-16
12.3 Summary of the main achievements.....	12-18
Chapter 13. Conclusion.....	13-1
13.1 Characteristics of the heterarchical shop floor control system model.....	13-3
13.2 The software related characteristics.....	13-5
13.3 Concluding comments on project goals and objectives.....	13-5
13.4 Summary.....	13-6
Chapter 14. Future work.....	14-1
14.1 Measuring the performance of agent based heterarchical control system.....	14-1
14.2. Measurement of the limitations placed on the system due to the performance of the communication network.....	14-2
14.3 Possible project extensions.....	14-3
14.3.1 Development of software modules as free-threaded COM components.....	14-3
14.3.2 Procedures for generating random events.....	14-3
14.3.3 Module for exporting data.....	14-4
14.3.4 Extending the negotiation mechanism to shared resources: AGVs, tools, jigs, and fixtures.....	14-4
14.3.5 Extending the system by introducing new agents of different types.....	14-5
14.3.6 Development of virtual workstations.....	14-6
14.3.7 Development of a real workstation.....	14-6

14.3.8 Incorporation of a shop floor management supervisory system.....	14-7
14.3.9 Extension to external companies via the Internet.....	14-8
14.4 Investigation of different controlling strategies.....	14-8
14.4.1 Resolving conflicting negotiation situations.....	14-9
14.4.2 Improving scheduling performances.....	14-9
14.4.3 Managing bottlenecks in a heterarchical multi-agent system by prior simulation.....	14-9
14.4.4 Achieving global coherence.....	14-11
14.4.4.1 By using a global scheduling criterion.....	14-11
14.4.4.2 By using global scheduling agent.....	14-11
14.4.4.3 By using cooperative scheduling.....	14-12
14.5 Integration of a distributed heterarchical shop floor control system with the other modules of a traditional Production Planning and Control system.....	14-13
14.6 Summary.....	14-13
Chapter 15. Literature.....	15-1
Appendix 1. Multi Threading.....	A1-1
1.1 Introduction.....	A1-1
1.2 The current design of a workstation agent - a monolithic application.....	A1-1
1.3 A proposed design of the workstation agent - an “n-tiered” application.....	A1-2
1.4 Threading - technical background.....	A1-4
1.5 Threads and scalability issues.....	A1-6
1.6 Threading and apartments.....	A1-6
1.6.1 A Single-Threaded Apartment (STA) model.....	A1-7
1.6.2 A multiple-threaded apartment model.....	A1-7
1.7 The proposed platform for the future developments.....	A1-8
1.8 Reusability of code by applying COM components.....	A1-8
1.9 Summary.....	A1-9
Appendix 2. A copy of the letter from the Massey University New Technology Developments Operations Group.....	A2-1

A list of figures

Figure 1-1. The research domain –The Shop Floor Control (SFC) system.....	1-10
Figure 3-1. Graphical definition of a Production Planning and Control (PPC) system.....	3-3
Figure 3-2. Simplified framework of a Production Planning and Control (PPC) system....	3-4
Figure 3-3. Capacity planning in the Production Planning and Control (PPC) system.....	3-10
Figure 4-1. Overview of scheduling methods	4-10
Figure 5-1. Similarity of Biological and Manufacturing Structures.....	5-11
Figure 5-2. Operation of Fractal entities.....	5-12
Figure 5-3. Generic model of a holarchy.....	5-14
Figure 5-4. General architecture of a holon.....	5-15
Figure 5-5. A holon architecture.....	5-21
Figure 6-1. Messages exchanged by the Contract Net Protocol.....	6-11
Figure 8-1. A layout of manually operated workstation.....	8-2
Figure 8-2. A layout of fully automated workstation.....	8-3
Figure 8-3. An example of a work cell layout.....	8-3
Figure 8-4. Process plan representation.....	8-5
Figure 8-5. Conventional and non-linear process plans.....	8-7
Figure 8-6. A manufacturing system model.....	8-8
Figure 8-7. A layout of the system input and output workstations.....	8-9
Figure 10-1. The proposed manufacturing control architecture	10-2
Figure 10-2. The functional model of a workstation agent.....	10-6
Figure 10-3. An example of a relationship diagram of workstation agents’ local database.....	10-7
Figure 10-4. An overview of data related for Part 10, Task 02.....	10-8
Figure 10-5. Relationship between the ISO/OSI Reference Model and the practical implementation of communication module.....	10-10
Figure 10-6. Simulation of workstation activities.....	10-15
Figure 10-7. Process of determining a “winner workstation” for conducting the next production task.....	10-21

Figure 11-1. A physical layout of computers in the network.....	11-2
Figure 11-2. An example work-part Pt0010 – Hub.....	11-4
Figure 11-3. The process plan for the example work-part Pt0010 – A shop floor (task) level plan.....	11-6
Figure 11-4. The process plan for the example work-part Pt0010 – A workstation (operation) level plan.....	11-6
Figure 11-5. A processing route table (PRT) for the example work-part Pt0010.....	11-7
Figure 11-6. The main menu.....	11-10
Figure 11-7. Parameter settings.....	11-10
Figure 11-8. A task announcement message.....	11-11
Figure 11-9. An information window - announcing arrival of a new message that needs to be sent.....	11-11
Figure 11-10. Monitoring of negotiation process.....	11-12
Figure 11-11. A container for bids that are to be received.....	11-12
Figure 11-12. Contents of the buffer for interpreting messages.....	11-14
Figure 11-13. An information window - announcing arrival of a new message that needs to be interpreted.....	11-14
Figure 11-14. An announcement that the winner workstation ID will be recorded in PRT	11-15
Figure 11-15. The negotiation algorithm (a).....	11-17
Figure 11-16. The negotiation algorithm (b) and (c).....	11-18

A list of figures – in appendixes

Figure 1-1. A monolithic application with objects	A1-2
Figure 1-2. Multi tier architecture	A1-3
Figure 1-3. The mapping between business objects and the data access layer	A1-3
Figure 1-4. Redesign of the workstation agent.....	A1-4
Figure 1-5. Win32 processes and threads.....	A1-5
Figure 1-6. Single threaded apartment model.....	A1-7
Figure 1-7. Marshalling calls across apartment boundaries by using the proxy/stub combination.....	A1-8
Figure 1-8. Apartment treaded model.....	A1-8
Figure 1-9. Reusability of code.....	A1-9

A list of tables

Table 3-1. Main characteristics of MRP and JIT approaches.....	3-13
Table 6-1. Agents from perspective of software evolution	6-3
Table 6-2. Communication strategies	6-7
Table 6-3. Coordination protocols	6-9
Table 6-4. Agent-based vs. conventional technologies	6-23
Table 10-1. A rudimentary set of instructions in the client application.....	10-11
Table 10-2. A rudimentary set of instructions in the server application.....	10-12
Table 10-3. An example of a task announcement message.....	10-18
Table 10-4. An example of a bid message.....	10-19
Table 11-1. Operation summary for the example work-part Pt0010.....	11-5

Abstract

This practically oriented research study concerns the design and implementation of the core part of a distributed heterarchical shop floor control (SFC) system based on the multi-agent paradigm. The system has been designed and developed with the primary aim of supporting production operations in discrete part manufacturing systems of a job-shop type. The “modus operandi” of the system is envisaged to be beneficial, and of a particular value, for job shop manufacturing systems that are characterised with:

- A large number of machine tools (manually operated or fully automated CNC machines);
- Low volume - high variety batch production (that is, in which products are fabricated in small quantities and many different product types); and
- Random arrival of production orders of different product types and quantities, (order rates, types, and sizes are not known in advance and are hard to predict).

A classical example of an appropriate manufacturing system is one that produces spare parts as single items or in small batches.

The project used multi-agent system theory and recent developments in software technology to solve the problems that concern modelling, design, development, and implementation of a proposed heterarchical SFC system. The project demonstrated (by using integrated simulation) how difficult and complex scheduling and resource allocation problems in job shop manufacturing systems could be successfully resolved in an on-line and real time manner.

Basic production and control units in the proposed approach were organised around workstations. Manufacturing operations inside workstations were simulated while the interaction among workstations (including communication and negotiation processes) was conducted in the same manner, as it would be in the real-life systems. These simulated activities as well as the “testing capabilities” of a workstation agent were integrated seamlessly into a single software package – a workstation agent. (The term “testing capabilities” refers to the feature that enables a user, for example, to capture a message that is sent to the workstation agent and then to postpone the message processing, to change the content of the message, or even to reject the entire message to see what effect this has on the total operation.)

The dissertation describes the structure for both the proposed manufacturing system resource model, which is based on *manufacturing workstations* as basic production units, and the heterarchical shop floor control system model, which is based on *workstation agents* as the basic control units. The heterarchical control system was demonstrated on a test-bed network application that was created with the objective of validating the concepts, and verifying the feasibility of the proposed concept. The dissertation outlines the main design aspects of the application (it describes basic modules of the production workstation agents) and describes the way in which the system operates, using an example of a simple workpart travelling through the system.