

GENERIC CASE STUDIES FOR MANUFACTURING SIMULATION APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Manufacturing managers typically commission simulation case studies to support their decision-making processes. These studies are used to evaluate alternative solutions to manufacturing problems in areas such as plant layout, scheduling, capacity planning, capital equipment acquisition, inventory management, and supply chain planning. Procedures for performing case studies vary from organization to organization, and situation to situation. It is possible that two different simulation analysts faced with the same manufacturing problem would perform their case studies differently, obtain different results, and reach different conclusions. The authors contend that standardization of the case study methodology and development of generic case studies would increase the likelihood that the simulation process will be deterministic, i.e., produce repeatable results. This paper presents background on case studies and makes recommendations concerning the advancement of manufacturing simulation case study methods and practices.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Manufacturing Simulation and Visualization Program at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is focused on accelerating the development of standards for simulation system interoperability, data formats, and model libraries. Simulation standards could help to facilitate the modeling process and reduce modeling costs. As part of our program strategy, we proposed a framework for manufacturing simulation data standards (McLean and Leong 2002).

The primary objective of the proposed simulation framework was to provide a scheme for the identification of the modules and data required to address various types of simulation problems. The framework included:

- industrial market sector
- hierarchical level of the manufacturing organization, system, or process
- simulation case study
- model elements, input, and output data.

Perhaps the most significant discriminating factor to be considered in developing a classification system for manufacturing simulation is industry market sector. The sector identifies the end-products that are to be manufactured. The hierarchy of organizations, systems, and processes are often unique to individual manufacturing sectors. Thus, the models and data required for a simulation case study are determined first by the sector and next by the manufacturing hierarchical level.

The second attribute of the proposed simulation classification framework is the hierarchical modeling level of the organization, system, or process. Various hierarchical and activity decompositions for manufacturing have been proposed by researchers over the years. Activity decompositions differ from the hierarchies in that only the activities and/or functions may be identified at each level of the structure. Different industries have different numbers of levels, groupings of elements, and naming conventions in their decompositions.

The third attribute of the framework is the simulation case study. Simulation case studies are conducted to analyze and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of manufacturing organizations, systems, and processes. Studies are designed to solve specific problems and get answers to specific questions. Studies often model some aspect of current operations and validate the effect of some hypothetical change(s) to those operations.

The last attribute of the framework is simulation models and data. It identifies common model, input, and output data interfaces that could be standardized for particular industry market sectors, hierarchical modeling levels, and simulation case studies. Data requirements (level of detail and complexity) are determined by simulation study and analysis objectives.

This paper is focused on the third attribute of the proposed simulation standards framework, the case study. In Section 2, we briefly look at the case study process as it has been applied in other areas and then focus on issues pertaining to the simulation case study. Section 3 provides a number of recommendations on how to enhance the manufactur-

ing simulation case study process and create generic case studies for industry. It recommends a number of standardization efforts relating to these studies. Section 4 offers conclusions and a brief summary of our future plans.

2 THE CASE STUDY PROCESS

This section briefly addresses the following topics: a general discussion of case study research, a preliminary categorization of simulation case study types, an overview of the methodology or process that is typically used for studies, and the role of abstraction in the simulation case study.

2.1 Case Study Research

The case study process is used in a number of research areas, but perhaps most notably in the social sciences. There has been considerable analysis and discussion of the case study process in published literature, see (Feagin et al. 1991; Gillham 2000; Gomm, Hammersly, and Foster 2000; Stake 1995; Tellis 1997; Yin 2002; and Yin 2003). Social science case studies are typically based on observations of a population. In the social science area, surveys and experiments are treated as different research methods, apart from case study research. Some general observations on case studies follow.

In Gillham (2003), a case study is defined as "...one which investigates the case to answer specific research questions and which seeks a range of different kinds of evidence, evidence which is there in the case setting, and which has to be abstracted and collated to get the best possible answers to the research questions. No one kind of source of evidence is likely to be sufficient (or sufficiently valid) on its own. This use of multiple sources of evidence, each with its strengths and weaknesses, is a key characteristic of case study research."

In (Yin 2003), W. Schramm is quoted as saying, "The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result."

Yin (2002) proposes five important components of case studies: a study's questions, its propositions (if any), its unit(s) of analysis, the logic linking the data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings.

There are both similarities and differences between general case study research and simulation case studies. Simulation case studies are typically focused on finding answers to questions through simulation-based experiments. In the social science arena, experimentation is considered to be a distinct research method separate from the case study. Social science case study researchers use observation, data collection, and analysis to try to develop theories that explain social phenomena and behaviors. Simulation analysts use observation and data collection to develop "as-is" models of

manufacturing systems, facilities, and organizations. The analysts test their theories and modifications to those models through simulation experiments using collected data as inputs. Data sets may be used to exercise both "as-is" and "to-be" simulation models. Data sets may also be fabricated to represent possible future "to-be" conditions, e.g., forecast work loads for a factory.

2.2 Simulation Case Study Types

In discussions with manufacturing managers that are unfamiliar with simulation, we are often asked questions to the effect of "Will the simulation tell us whether we should do X?" The remainder of the question, the "X," typically concerns changes in staff, equipment, job scheduling policies, etc. A common misunderstanding is that simulation will tell you anything directly, i.e., recommend a specific course of action. Simulation models are typically used to: allow for a better understanding of the actual system, ascertain the critical resources of the system, gain the confidence of the decision makers regarding the used methodology, and validate the assumptions made to build the simulation model (Kelton et al. 1998).

Simulations are essentially experiments. As defined in (Banks 1998), simulation is: "...the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time. Simulation involves the generation of an artificial history of the system and the observation of that artificial history to draw inferences concerning the operational characteristics of the real system that is represented. Simulation is an indispensable problem-solving methodology for the solution of many real-world problems. Simulation is used to describe and analyze the behavior of a system, ask what-if questions about the real system, and aid in the design of real systems. Both existing and conceptual systems can be modeled with simulation."

Simulation case studies are conducted to analyze and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of manufacturing organizations, systems, and processes. Studies are designed to solve specific problems and get answers to specific questions. Studies often model some aspect of current operations and validate the effect of some hypothetical change(s) to those operations. The performance of current and proposed systems are evaluated according to some set of metrics. If the simulation shows that sufficient improvements can be expected, then the proposed changes are implemented.

In Standridge (2000), teaching simulation through the use of manufacturing case studies is discussed. He organizes case studies into four modules:

- *Basic manufacturing systems organizations*, such as work stations, production lines, and job shops
- *System operating strategies* including pull (just-in-time) versus push operations, flexible manufac-

turing, cellular manufacturing, and complete automation

- *Material handling mechanisms* such as conveyors, automated guided vehicle systems, and automated storage/retrieval systems
- *Supply chain management* including automated inventory management, logistics, and multiple locations for inventory

In McLean and Leong (2002), a broader categorization scheme was proposed. A number of manufacturing simulation case study types and examples of possible study objectives were discussed briefly. The case study types that were identified are: market forecast, logistics network, site selection, business process, scheduling, plant, capital equipment, work force, product mix, capacity analysis, line balancing, cost estimation, process validation, process capability, tolerance analysis, ergonomic analysis, tooling, inventory, material handling, and maintenance. This list of study types was not necessarily intended to be complete or comprehensive. Some of these case study types could be further subdivided. The list is intended to illustrate the wide variety of different reasons for performing simulation case studies.

Simulation case study problem formulations and objectives define the reasons for performing the simulation. Some examples of study objectives might be to evaluate the best site for a new plant, create a better layout for an existing facility, determine the impact of a proposed new machine on shop production capacity, or evaluate alternative scheduling algorithms.

High-level study objectives can be further decomposed into individual questions that may be answered directly from simulation results. If the study objective is site selection, one question might be: Which site would result in the lowest expected overall operating costs given several different projected levels of production (demand) for a selected set of products?

2.3 Simulation Case Study Process

Simulation textbooks typically recommend that a ten to twelve step process be followed in the development of simulation case studies. The recommended approach usually involves the following steps: (1) problem formulation, (2) setting of objectives and overall project plan, (3) model conceptualization, (4) data collection, (5) model translation into computerized format, (6) code verification, (7) model validation, (8) design of experiments to be run, (9) production runs and analysis, (10) documentation and reporting, and (11) implementation (Banks et al. 1996). See also Banks (1998), Kelton et al. (1998), or Law and Kelton (2000).

Unfortunately, this approach often leaves the simulation analyst with considerable work and possibly too much creative responsibility. The analyst is often faced with answering very broad, open-ended questions, such as:

- What is the problem that needs to be simulated?

- What are the objectives of the simulation?
- What is the conceptual model of the problem?
- How will the real world system be abstracted for implementation within the simulator?
- What data is available and how will it be collected?
- What simulation system or language will be used?
- What input and output data formats are required?
- Will the simulator need to interact with other application such as other software and database?
- Do new data formats need to be developed?
- What probability distributions are needed to approximate the behavior of the real system?
- How will the model be verified and validated?
- How many times should the model be run to ensure statistically significant results?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the simulation results?

Using the “textbook” approach, at its current level of specificity, the process of modeling and simulation is perhaps as much an art as it is a science. Simulations are often developed from scratch, so the skill of the individual analyst may figure significantly in the quality and interpretation of the results that are obtained. With current simulation technology, there is little opportunity for the analyst to build upon the work of others since each simulation is built as a custom solution to a uniquely-defined problem. Input data from other manufacturing software applications is not often in the format required for simulation, so data must often be abstracted, reformatted, and/or translated. Furthermore, pressure from manufacturing management to obtain quick results may have an adverse effect on the performance of the simulation analyst and the quality of results obtained.

2.4 Role of Abstraction in Simulation Case Studies

What is abstraction? In “Steps in a Simulation Study” in Banks (1998), the model conceptualization process is described as “The real-world system under investigation is abstracted by a conceptual model, a series of mathematical and logical relationships concerning the components of the system.” The artificial intelligence (AI) community has focused its attention on the abstraction process for many years. A “representation” and a “description” are terms that are often used to describe what the abstraction process produces. In the AI world, it is often said that creating an appropriate representation is a large part of the solution to any problem.

In Winston (1992), a representation is defined as “a set of conventions about how to describe a class of things. A description makes use of a representation to describe some

particular thing.” Winston also defines the four fundamental parts of a representation:

- Lexical – determines which symbols are allowed in the representation vocabulary
- Structural – describes constraints on how symbols can be arranged
- Procedural – specifies access procedures to create, modify, and query descriptions
- Semantic – establishes a way to associate meaning with descriptions

Because the representation and the description are not the real “thing or things” that are being modeled, there is always the possibility of introducing errors every time a representation or description is created. Figure 1 illustrates the general concept of the abstraction as it pertains to manufacturing simulation and modeling. On the left hand side, we start with something real, i.e., the target “thing(s)” to be modeled. They may be real “things,” such as manufacturing objects, processes, systems, or facilities. It is also possible that the “thing(s)” are descriptions based on some form of representation, e.g., a layout drawing of a facility. A manager, engineer, simulation analyst, or member of the production staff performs an abstraction process and creates an output representation and/or description. The abstraction process may involve observation, analysis, simplification, approximation, substitution, representation, and/or description. The outputs are new conceptual representations or descriptions of the “thing(s)” with the possible introduction of errors.

In Figure 2, the abstraction process is mapped into a simplified version of the case study process that was outlined in the previous section. Abstraction occurs in many places in the process, hence there are many opportunities to introduce errors into simulation models. For additional perspectives on the role of abstraction in simulation, including a taxonomy of model abstraction approaches, see (Frantz 2003).

Abstraction is an intrinsic part of the manufacturing simulation modeling process. It consumes considerable time and effort. It can be a major source of errors. In the next section, we recommend improvements to the simulation case study process that address the abstraction issue.

3 CASE STUDY IMPROVEMENTS

How might the simulation case study process be improved? The answer to this question lies in a statement made by the mathematician Alfred North Whitehead in *Introduction to Mathematics* (Whitehead 1911): “Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them.” Some illustrations of this concept include: the Internet, global telecommunications, and the air transportation system. Unfortunately, the application of simulation to the solution of complex problems has not advanced as rapidly as technology in recent years.

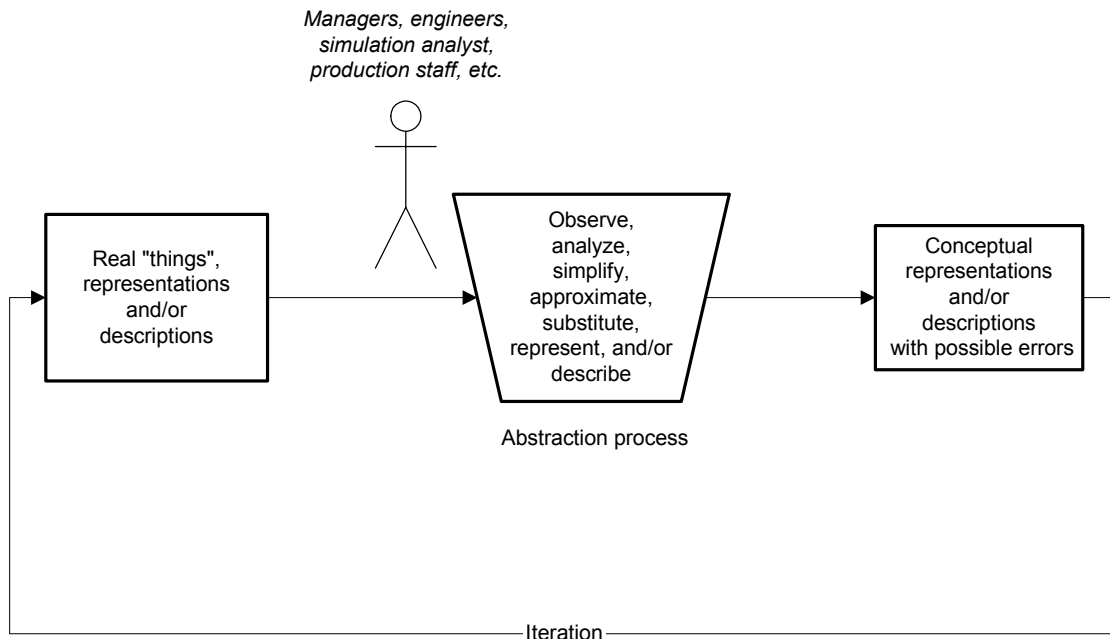


Figure 1: The General Concept of the Abstraction Process

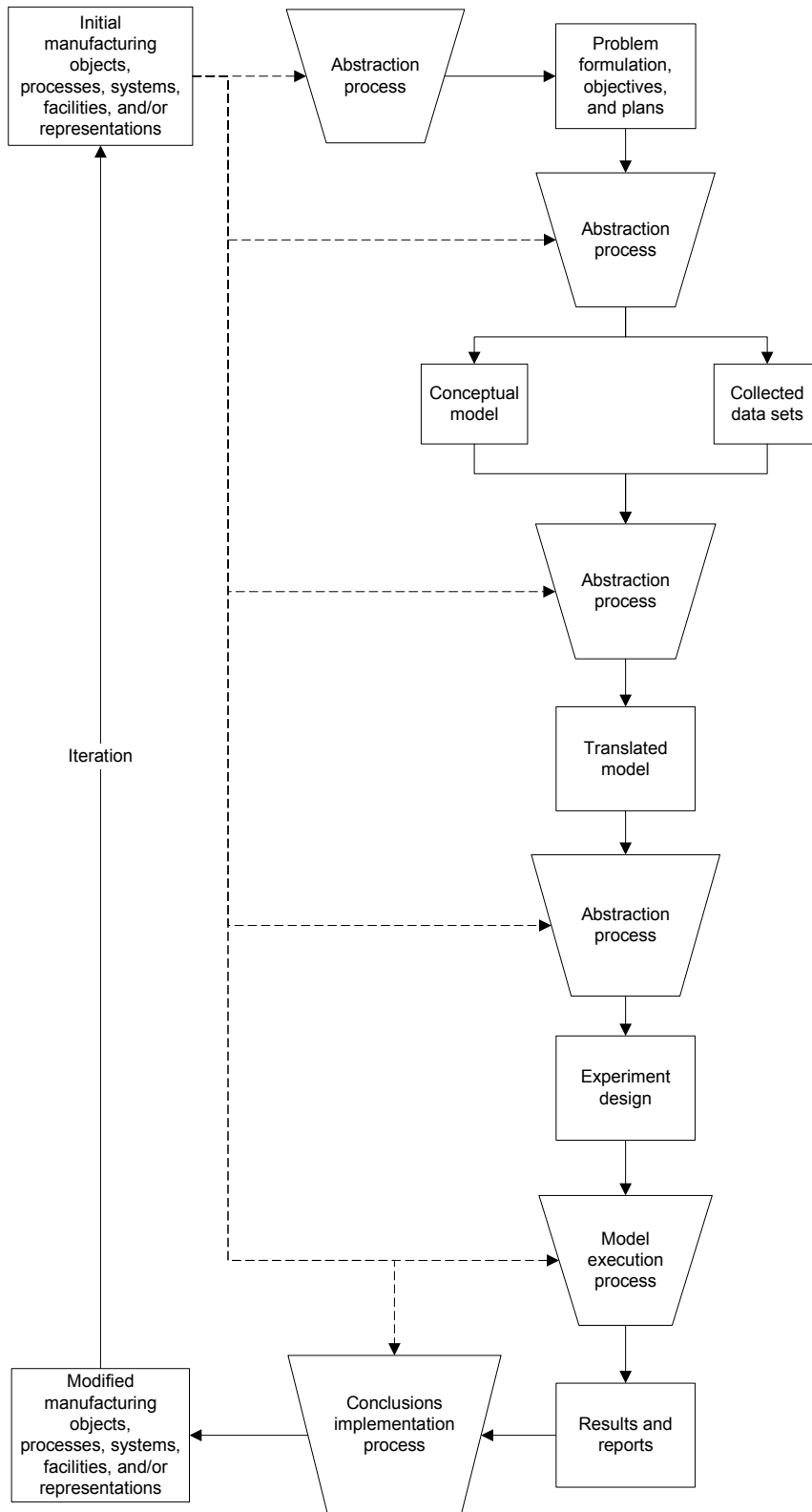


Figure 2: Role of the Abstraction in the Simulation Case Study Process

Whitehead's prescient statement in 1911 captures the essence of the problem that the simulation community is faced with today. The process of obtaining the answer to a simulation problem, requires far, far too much thought. In the nineteenth century, it took the pioneers many months to cross the continent in covered wagons – today it may take roughly the same amount of time to perform a complex simulation case study. For example in the year 2000, three NIST research staff spent roughly five months developing a generic shipyard simulator to address steel fabrication problems for the U.S. Navy's National Shipbuilding Research Program (McLean and Shao 2001).

Information technology has advanced because of our ability to decompose the solution to complex problems through many layers of abstraction and processing capabilities. With the addition of each new layer of automated processing, we no longer have to give thought to the layers below. With each layer of problem decomposition, a new set of interfaces is required to the layer that is added above.

The interface standards would enable open development and establish a level playing field for free market competition. Once the standard is defined, private companies may compete to offer the best technical solution that implements the standard. In this section, we discuss standardization of: (1) information models and data formats, (2) the case study methodology, (3) study templates and repositories, and (4) case study specification languages and compilers.

3.1 Information Models and Data Formats

The development of conceptual models and their translation into simulations require special skills and experience. Many potential simulation users do not have the resources to create adequate conceptual models and simulations of their manufacturing objects, processes, systems, and facilities. Even if they had these conceptual models, they would still need to develop custom data translators to import their data from other manufacturing software applications. Standard conceptual models and associated data formats based on commonly-accepted abstractions, could help to reduce the costs associated with simulation model construction and data exchange between simulation and other software applications – therefore making simulation technology more affordable and accessible to a wider range of users.

The Manufacturing Simulation and Visualization at NIST is currently developing information models and data exchange formats to address this problem (Lee et al. 2003). The current effort provides neutral data interfaces for integrating machine shop software applications with simulation. The current shop data specification addresses organizations, calendars, work, resources, schedules, parts, process plans, and layouts. The specification has been developed using the Unified Modeling Language (UML) and

the Extensible Markup Language (XML), see Alhir (1998), DuCharme (1999), and Goldfarb (2002). There are also plans to expand the specifications to include assembly lines, supply chains, and other domain areas. The model will be proposed as a candidate standard to be considered by a formal standards development body this year.

3.2 Case Study Methodology

There appears to be general agreement among the experts regarding the basic steps involved in the case study process, see (Banks, Carson, and Nelson 1996; Banks 1998, Kelton, Sadowski, and Sadowski 1998). In practice, individual simulation analysts have much discretion; they can often perform a case study any way they choose. As such, simulation projects will be carried out differently by different analysts. Results and conclusions may be suspect. Industrial management's confidence in simulation technology and the simulation industry may be diminished.

ISO 9000 is a family of standards that deals with quality management systems in industry (ISO 2003). One of the functions of the standard is to establish a management system that provides confidence in the conformance of products to specified requirements. Products include services, processed material, hardware and software. ISO 9000 standards specify fundamentals, vocabulary, system requirements, and provide guidelines for performing a number of different processes associated with quality management.

In a similar manner to ISO 9000, the simulation case study process could be standardized. Such standardization could help to improve industry's confidence in the use of simulation technology.

3.3 Generic Case Study Templates and Repositories

Each new simulation case study performed today probably repeats at least some work previously done by others. Case studies typically contain proprietary information that private companies do not want to share. For this reason, it is unlikely that most case studies will ever be seen outside of the company that commissioned them.

How can the duplication of work be minimized? The development of standard templates for different types of case studies would be a step in the right direction. Currently the textbook approach to performing case studies outlined in Section 3.2 is domain independent. More work could be done to create case study templates that are generic but more problem-domain specific, e.g., for scheduling, layout, and material handling. Resources in the academic, research, and standards communities could be applied to this problem, thus avoiding the proprietary information content issues.

Individual case studies should be able to be used as modular building blocks and templates to solve more complex manufacturing problems. For example, a real

manufacturing problem might involve issues of site selection and plant layout. The resulting composite simulation case study may be constructed by assembling models and data from two, different, basic case study templates.

Ideally, case study templates should be “atomic,” i.e., unique, indivisible, and non-overlapping. A rigorous analysis should be used to ensure that each case study forms a clean, basic building block. The analysis should aim to assign any specific objective or question type to only one type of case study. A major reason for this rule is to avoid the infinite proliferation of custom-defined case studies.

On the other hand, different case studies might use the same conceptual models, simulation models, input, and output data. This can be demonstrated by example. Scheduling and plant layout might be two unique, non-overlapping case study areas. The same simulation output metric, e.g., system throughput, might be used as a performance metric to evaluate layout and scheduling changes.

The generic case study templates could vary by both the study topic area (e.g., scheduling, layout) and manufacturing product domain (e.g., semiconductor, shipbuilding, automotive). Repositories would need to be established for the case study templates so that they could be readily accessed by simulation analysts and software developers. Various funding organizations, industry groups, and research institution, with interests in the area of simulation, might be able to be encouraged to support this effort.

3.4 Specification Language and Compilers

The process of translating one computer language into another is usually done by a computer program called a compiler (or directly, in real-time, by an interpreter). These translation programs typically perform a rather complicated process of substituting program statements and data structures in a high level language into a lower level language. Other tools, beyond the scope of this paper, such as “make” programs and linkers are also used in the program build process.

The development and standardization of a formal computer language for specifying simulation case study parameters could help to minimize the abstraction problem. The problem formulation, study objectives, conceptual models, collected data sets, simulator selection, and other parameters of the case study are not currently specified in any standard way. The assembly of this information is the first stage of an abstraction process that generates representations and descriptions that are not well-defined. Therefore, errors may be introduced. Manual construction of simulations based on these representations and descriptions may lead to the introduction of additional errors.

A case study specification language could make it possible to build compilers that automatically generate simulation models for target simulators or simulation languages. Compilers and linkers would then need to be cre-

ated and tested to ensure that simulation study specifications were correctly translated into executable simulation code. The automation of this model generation process, through a compiler, would ensure that a given simulation study specification would always result in the generation of the same executable model and simulation outputs.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Simulation case studies are often used to support management and technical decisions in manufacturing industry. Although simulation has been repeatedly shown to be a valuable tool, its use is not as widespread as it might be. This paper presented a brief overview of the case study process and has suggested possible ways to improve case studies through the development of new standards. Recommendations included development of standards for the case study process itself, a specification language for defining case studies, neutral simulation models and data formats, and generic study templates.

Our immediate plans are to continue work on the shop data interface specification and initiate the standardization process. We are also beginning to define requirements for the simulation case study specification language. We welcome suggestions and comments on the topics presented in this paper.

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