Modelling Large-Scale Discrete-Event Systems Using Modules, Aliases, and Extended Finite-State Automata

Robi Malik ∗ Martin Fabian ∗ ∗ Knut Åkesson ∗ ∗

* Department of Computer Science, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand (e-mail: robi@cs.waikato.ac.nz)
** Department of Signals and Systems, Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden (e-mail: [fabian|knut]@chalmers.se)

Abstract: This paper describes the instantiation features currently implemented in the discrete-event systems modelling and analysis tool Supremica. Modules enable users to design reusable groups of related automata and define clear interfaces to describe their interaction. Parametrisation and repetition make it easy to design very large models of regular structure. In combination with its support for extended finite-state automata (EFA), these features enable Supremica users to develop highly complex models of discrete-event systems using a wide variety of modelling styles.

Keywords: Discrete event systems modelling and control; Automata, Petri Nets and other tools.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key challenges for the acceptance of discrete event system modelling tools is the development of a user-friendly modelling language that is accepted by users in industry. For several years, hierarchical and modular modelling approaches have been used as a means to introduce structure into discrete event systems (Wong and Wonham, 1998; Leduc et al., 2005), but such methods have only recently been supported in more general modelling tools.

Other ways of modelling reactive or control systems are based on extended finite-state automata (EFA) or Echarts (Harel, 1987), which use guards and actions to read and update variables while executing transitions. Several concurrency models are based on these ideas, e.g., (Hoare, 1985). More recently, (Sköldstam et al., 2007) combine EFA with discrete event systems, providing a semantics for guards and actions in combination with event-based automata. This approach introduces signal-based or program-code based modelling styles, making discrete event systems more accessible to industrial users.

The modelling of large-scale systems often requires parametrisation and instantiation support that is both powerful and easy to learn and use. The VALID toolset (Brandin, 2000) introduces templates as a means to maintain multiple copies of similar automata. The idea is to create a single automaton, called template, which is instantiated multiple times by applying different event bindings, resulting in several similar copies of the same automaton. The more recent tool IDES (Grigorov et al., 2008; Grigorov and Rudie, 2010) offers a more general template modelling approach, which supports flexible event bindings and extended finite-state automata.

This paper presents the modelling and parametrisation features presently available in the discrete events systems modelling tool Supremica (Åkesson et al., 2006). Supremica uses modules, which provide more general ways of instantiation than templates, by grouping several automata together with defined interfaces. Modules naturally provide the infrastructure needed for modular and hierarchical modelling, and in combination with other features such as event groups and extended finite-state automata, they also provide for strong parametrisation capabilities.

This paper is organised as follows. Sect. 2 briefly gives some needed definitions of finite-state automata in the context of supervisory control theory. It is followed by sect. 3, which describes the instantiation and parametrisation features implemented in Supremica, and by sect. 4, which presents two examples of moderately complex models that can be conveniently instantiated using Supremica’s features. Finally, sect. 5 adds some concluding remarks.

2. PRELIMINARIES

The modelling approach used by Supremica is based on supervisory control theory of discrete event systems (Ramadge and Wonham, 1989; Wonham, 2009; Cassandras and Lafortune, 1999). System behaviours are represented using finite-state automata and their languages.

Definition 1. A finite-state automaton is a 5-tuple G = (§, Q, →, Qi, Qm), where § is a finite alphabet of events, Q is a set of states, → ⊆ Q × § × Q is the state transition relation, Qi ⊆ Q is the set of initial states, and Qm ⊆ Q is the set of marked or terminal states.

When two or more automata are executing in parallel, synchronous composition in the style of (Hoare, 1985) is used to compose them.
Definition 2. Let $G = \langle \Sigma_G, Q_G, \rightarrow_G, \mathcal{Q}_G \rangle$ and $H = \langle \Sigma_H, Q_H, \rightarrow_H, \mathcal{Q}_H \rangle$ be two automata. The synchronous product of $G$ and $H$ is

\[ G \parallel H = \langle \Sigma_G \cup \Sigma_H, Q_G \times Q_H, \rightarrow, \mathcal{Q}_G \times \mathcal{Q}_H \rangle \] (1)

where

\[ (x_G, x_H) \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow} (y_G, y_H) \quad \text{if} \quad \sigma \in \Sigma_G \cap \Sigma_H, \ x_G \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow}_G y_G, \ and \ x_H \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow}_H y_H; \]

\[ (x_G, x_H) \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow} (y_G, x_H) \quad \text{if} \quad \sigma \in \Sigma_G \setminus \Sigma_H \ and \ x_G \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow}_G y_G; \]

\[ (x_G, x_H) \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow} (x_G, y_H) \quad \text{if} \quad \sigma \in \Sigma_H \setminus \Sigma_G \ and \ x_H \overset{\sigma}{\rightarrow}_H y_H. \]

In supervisory control (Ramadge and Wonham, 1989), there are two types of automata, representing the plant, i.e., the system to be controlled, and the specification, i.e., the desired behaviour to be imposed on the plant through control. The event set $\Sigma$ is partitioned into the set $\Sigma_u$ of uncontrollable events and the set $\Sigma_c$ of controllable events. Controllable events are under the control of some supervising agent or control software, and can be disabled through control, while uncontrollable events occur spontaneously in the plant.

3. MODELLING

Supremica (Åkesson et al., 2006) is a tool for the modelling and analysis of finite-state machine models. Discrete event systems consisting of multiple plant and specification automata can be modelled graphically using the editor. Model execution can be visualised using the simulator, and the analyser provides a wide range of verification and synthesis algorithms. All these features are available in the comfortable graphical interface of Supremica’s Integrated Development Environment (IDE), shown in fig. 1.

Supremica’s graphical editor is designed to support the modelling of large-scale discrete event systems models using a wide variety of modelling styles. The following subsections describe the modelling approach and its features in more detail.

3.1 Modules and Instances

The main modelling unit in Supremica is a module, which represents a reusable collection of events and associated automata. Events can be controllable or uncontrollable, and automata can be classified as plant or specification. For example, fig. 2 shows a module that describes the behaviour of a robot, consisting of four events and two automata. Events and automata are listed to the left, and the two plant automata are shown to the right.

Each automaton has an event alphabet, which in Supremica is the set of all events that appear in the graphical representation. Within a module, automata synchronise using shared events as per the standard definition of synchronous product.

In addition to its events and automata, a module may contain instances of other modules. Instantiating a module means to include copies of all automata and events of...
module Robot
events
controllable parameter enable;
controllable parameter disable;
controllable turn;
controllable extend;
components
plant base;
plant arm;
end

Fig. 2. Robot module.

the used (or instantiated) module within the calling (or instantiating) module.

Each module has its unique event set, and by default does not share any events with other modules. Events are local to their module and are only used for synchronisation of the automata within the module. When a module \( A \) contains two instances of another module \( B \), this means that two separate independent copies of all the events and automata of \( B \) are created and placed in \( A \). The two copies of \( B \) neither synchronise with each other nor with \( A \).

To support synchronisation between modules, events can be defined to be a parameter of their module. When a module with parameters is instantiated, the instantiating module needs to provide an actual event from its own event set for each parameter of the instantiated module. After instantiation, the parameter event is replaced by the actual event, which may now synchronise with automata in other modules.

module Factory
events
controllable start[1..5];
controllable stop;
components
Robot\_1 = Robot(enable = start\_1, disable = stop);
Robot\_2 = Robot(enable = start\_2, disable = stop);
end

Fig. 4. Factory consisting of five robots.

In fig. 3, two instances of the Robot from fig. 2 are created to model a factory. This results in two copies of each of the automata base and arm being placed in the Factory module, which then contains automata Robot\_1.base, Robot\_1.arm, Robot\_2.base, and Robot\_2.arm. The events turn and extend are not parameters of the Robot module. These events remain local, and separate copies Robot\_1.turn, Robot\_1.turn, Robot\_1.extend, and Robot\_2.extend are created, synchronising only within their Robot instance.

The parameter events enable are replaced by the events start\_1 resp. start\_2 of the Factory module, which may be shared by other automata of Factory (not shown in the example). The parameter events disable of both modules are replaced by the same event stop, effectively forcing synchronisation between the two robots. In this way, the events enable and disable in the robot module are linked to the factory’s events start\_1, start\_2, and stop in a similar way as proposed in the template approach of (Grigorov et al., 2008).

3.2 Arrays and Repetition

Many large discrete-event systems models have regular structure, consisting of several similar automata with similar events. Often, the number of components is large or subject to parametrisation, making it difficult to instantiate the automata or modules individually. Supremica supports such models using arrays of events and indexed components.

Events can be declared to be arrays with any number of dimensions, the only restriction being that all events in an array must have the same controllability status. Likewise, automata and module instances can be indexed, also producing an array-like collection of components.

module Factory
events
controllable start[1..5];
controllable stop;
components
for i = 1..5 do
  Robot[i] = Robot(enable = start[i], disable = stop);
end

Fig. 5 shows the use of these features to model a buffer with parametrisable size. The variable \( c \), which can assume the values from 0 to size, stores the number of items currently...
module Buffer(int size)

events
  uncontrollable parameter put;
  controllable parameter get;

components
  variable c: 0..size initial 0;
  specification spec;

end

Fig. 5. Parametrisable buffer module.

in the buffer. Its initial value is 0, i.e., the buffer initially is empty. The specification automaton is only needed to associate guards and actions to the events: an item can only be put into the buffer when it is not yet full, and this action increases the number of items in the buffer by one; and an item can only be removed from the buffer when it is not empty, and this action decreases the number of items in the buffer by one.

3.4 Event Groups and Aliases

Large discrete-event systems models may contain automata using a large number of events, and often the same groups of events appear on different transitions in the same or in different automata. To facilitate the design and the readability in such cases, event groups and aliases have been introduced in Supremica.

An event alias is a placeholder for an event or a group of events, for example:

events
  controllable start1;
  controllable start2;
  controllable start3;
  alias start = {start1, start2, start3};

Here, the events start1, start2, and start3 form an event group and are bound to the alias start. The alias can be used anywhere where an ordinary event can be used: it can be placed on transitions of automata or it can be bound as an actual value to the parameters of an instantiated module. According to standard discrete-event systems semantics, a transition labelled with the alias start will be enabled when one or more of the events in the group are enabled.

3.5 Group Nodes

Group nodes are a graphical abstraction inspired by Statecharts (Harel, 1987). Their use for modelling discrete event systems was introduced in VALID (Brandin, 2000) and extended in (Ma and Wonham, 2005). In Supremica, group nodes are used to simplify the graphical representation of an automaton by making it possible to group transitions to the same target state together. For example, in fig. 6, the reset transition originating from the group node represents four transitions to the automaton’s initial state, one from each state within the group.

4. EXAMPLES

This section presents two examples that demonstrate how Supremica’s modelling and instantiation features help to model complex discrete event systems easily and concisely.
module TransferLine(int n)

events

controllable start\(_M\)[1..n];
uncontrollable finish\(_M\)[1..n];
controllable start\(_T\)[0..n];
uncontrollable accept\(_T\)[0..n];
uncontrollable reject\(_T\)[1..n];

components

Init = Machine(start = start\(_T\)[0], finish = accept\(_T\)[0]);
for _i = 1..n do
  Mach\(_i\) = Machine(start = start\(_M\)[\_i], finish = finish\(_M\)[\_i]);
  TU\(_i\) = TestUnit(start = start\(_T\)[\_i], accept = accept\(_T\)[\_i], reject = reject\(_T\)[\_i], get = start\(_T\)[\_i]);
end
end

Fig. 8. Transfer line module.

module TicTacToe

events

controllable black[0..2][0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_black\_x[0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_black\_y[0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_black\_d1;
uncontrollable winner\_black\_d2;
alias winner\_black = {winner\_black\_x, winner\_black\_y, winner\_black\_d1, winner\_black\_d2};
uncontrollable white[0..2][0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_white\_x[0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_white\_y[0..2];
uncontrollable winner\_white\_d1;
uncontrollable winner\_white\_d2;
alias winner\_white = {winner\_white\_x, winner\_white\_y, winner\_white\_d1, winner\_white\_d2};
uncontrollable draw;

components

plant move;
for _x = 0..2 do
  for _y = 0..2 do
    plant square[\_x][\_y];
  end
end
for _x = 0..2 do
  Row\_White\_X[\_x] = Row(put = {white[\_x][0], white[\_x][1], white[\_x][2]}, win = winner\_white\_x[\_x], opp = black);
  Row\_Black\_X[\_x] = Row(put = {black[\_x][0], black[\_x][1], black[\_x][2]}, win = winner\_black\_x[\_x], opp = white);
end
for _y = 0..2 do
  Row\_White\_Y[\_y] = Row(put = {white[0][\_y], white[1][\_y], white[2][\_y]}, win = winner\_white\_y[\_y], opp = black);
  Row\_Black\_Y[\_y] = Row(put = {black[0][\_y], black[1][\_y], black[2][\_y]}, win = winner\_black\_y[\_y], opp = white);
end
Row\_White\_D1 = Row(put = {white[0][0], white[1][1], white[2][2]}, win = winner\_white\_d1, opp = black);
Row\_Black\_D1 = Row(put = {black[0][0], black[1][1], black[2][2]}, win = winner\_black\_d1, opp = white);
Row\_White\_D2 = Row(put = {white[0][2], white[1][1], white[2][0]}, win = winner\_white\_d2, opp = black);
Row\_Black\_D2 = Row(put = {black[0][2], black[1][1], black[2][0]}, win = winner\_black\_d2, opp = white);
plant game\_over;
spec white\_never\_wins;
end

Fig. 9. Tic Tac Toe module.
transfer lines can be obtained from a single parametrizable module with three simple automata. Supremica has successfully instantiated and analysed transfer lines with more than 100 functional blocks and more than $10^{150}$ reachable states.

4.2 Tic Tac Toe Game

The second example models the rules of the Tic Tac Toe game and can be used synthesise a strategy for this game. Two players, white and black, are taking turns to occupy the squares of a $3 \times 3$ board. The winner is the player who first occupies a horizontal, vertical, or diagonal row of three squares.

Fig. 9 shows a module representing this game. It uses two two-dimensional arrays for the moves of the two players. For example, $\text{white}[x][y]$ indicates that square $(x, y)$ is occupied by the white player. The model is intended to synthesise a strategy for the black player, so white moves are uncontrollable and black moves are controllable. The plant automaton move models the fact that the two players are taking their moves alternatingly, and white moves first. Although white and black are event arrays, the automaton just uses the event labels white and black, which represent implicitly defined event groups containing all nine events in their array. This feature makes it possible to model the alternation of moves concisely and independently of the exact set of possible moves.

The plant automaton $\text{square}[x][y]$ models the rule that each square can be occupied only once. It is instantiated nine times, once for each square $(x, y)$.

There are eight possible ways how a player can win, corresponding to the eight possible rows that can be formed. Each winning condition is represented by an uncontrollable event, using arrays for the three horizontal and vertical rows. Aliases $\text{winner}_\text{white}$ and $\text{winner}_\text{black}$ group the winning conditions for each player together. To correctly capture the winning conditions, the Row automaton needs to be instantiated differently for each row. The automaton models the fact, that a row is completed (win) when its three squares are all occupied (put). Once a row is completed, the game is over and the opponent of the winning player can no longer move (opp). To instantiate all the winning conditions, the Row automaton is placed in a module of its own, which is instantiated 16 times with appropriate bindings for the events win, put, and opp.

Two final automata complete the model. Plant game_over uses the aliases $\text{winner}_\text{white}$ and $\text{winner}_\text{black}$ to model the liveness requirement that it must always be possible for the game to end, either by one player winning, or by draw. Automaton $\text{white}_\text{never}_\text{wins}$ represents a control specification that disables all winning events of the white player. It uses a blocked events list to ensure that all events of the $\text{winner}_\text{white}$ group are in the automaton alphabet although there are no transitions associated with them. This feature of Supremica enables the modelling of globally disabled events without the overhead of adding unreachable states. The specification $\text{white}_\text{never}_\text{wins}$ can be used to synthesise a least restrictive strategy (Ramadge and Wonham, 1989) ensuring that the black player never loses the game.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The modelling features implemented in the discrete events systems tool Supremica have been presented. The software is freely available for download and includes a user-friendly graphical interface to model complex finite-state machine models. Module instantiation and event groups make it easy to create large and parametrised models by specifying only a small number of automata that are reused several times. The support for extended finite-state machines provides for variables, guards, and actions, thus supporting not only event-based models, but also signal-based and state-based modelling styles, and styles that are more closely related to program code.

REFERENCES


1 http://www.supremica.org