Multi-Agent Systems Coursework Report

Abstract

This project uses agents to tackle a computing problem involving the supply chain of creating and selling mobile phones, where agents handle the roles of parts supplying, phone manufacturing and customers who order and buy the phones. The project implements a 100-day simulation of this agent supply chain, with a focus on the performance of the manufacturer agent, of which there is only one within the system. The system is then experimented with, to test hypotheses based on how the system will perform.

Introduction

This project tackles the “smartphone supply chain problem”, a computing problem focused on the automation of the manufacture and sales of mobile phones. The problem takes place from the perspective of a mobile phone manufacturer, who needs to buy parts from their suppliers, take orders from customers and then construct telephones based upon their orders with the parts in stock. The crux of the problem is maximising profits and minimising squandered time through the use of computing solutions. This is important in the current market due to the ongoing “arms race” to automate every part of the supply chain, allowing businesses to be more efficient in their processing with the aim of landing higher net profits. The automation allows for a reduction in unnecessary staff as well as improving the efficiency and accuracy of tasks, such as finding parts at the best price from suppliers, at the cost of the lump sum development cost of a system to undergo the process.

There are various potential approaches to tackling the automation, however the one of interest with this project is using multi-agent systems. Groves, Collins, Gini and Ketter (2014) explore the idea of utilising agents for use within supply chain management. They suggest that agents can be very effectively utilised under the right market environments. They present the idea using their own set of agents with various simulated market conditions. They conclude that although their simulated market conditions did not match that of any real-world markets, valuable insights were gained to suggest strong potential of agents having usage within real-world market environments.

Model design

Agent role identification:

Manufacturer - The “main” agent within the system, of which there will only be one at any given time. This agent is tasked with receiving orders from customer agents, ordering parts from supplier agents, and optimising time and cost efficiency by planning how to tackle each order, and which suppliers to buy which parts from. This agent calculates all profits made and deducts all costs for parts and part storage to calculate net profit. A maximum of 50 ordered phones can be made within a single simulated day. When a customer’s order is received, a total due date is provided for the order, if this date is not met, a penalty is also incurred.

Customer - Within the system, there will be three customer agents by default, which can be changed with a variable. For every day simulated within the system, each customer will generate one order per day. Each order will consist of only one type of phone (each having all the same parts) which will be randomly generated each day, in a random quantity, which is also randomised per day.

Supplier - There will be two suppliers within the system by default, each with their own inventory and parameters. The first supplier stocks every part required by the manufacturer and delivers ordered parts the next day. The second supplier only has around half of the parts that the manufacturer needs and takes four days to deliver, however the stocked parts are massively discounted in comparison to the first supplier.

Ontology justification:

The ontology used for the design of the system can be found within *Appendix 1*. The ontology can be broken down into three sections.

First is the “phone part” section, this is used to define what a part is, what parts there are, and what variations of each part are available. For example, within the system there are only two types of battery, 2000 and 3000 mAh variations, therefore the ontology shows specifically only those two types of battery.

The second section of the ontology is the “order” section, which breaks down what any single order from a single customer will contain. The things found here are the “phone type”, which is the design specification of the type of phone being ordered, since only one type of phone is ordered at a time, the “number of devices”, which is the amount of phones of the single type within the order, and the “due date”, being the randomised date to which the order is due before late fees are applied.

The third and final section of the ontology is the sales chain, a section which shows which members of the supply chain sell to whom. It shows suppliers, who each have a name, a list of phone parts and a delivery time associated to them, selling to the manufacturer. It then shows the manufacturer, who in this system has exactly three customers and two suppliers associated with them, as well as having a list of orders, selling to a customer. The customer is the end of this sales chain, with each customer having a name and a list of orders they’ve made. In the case of the order lists held by both the manufacturer and by each customer, no minimum boundary is set, since both can have zero orders currently active at a given time.

Agent communication protocols:

The sequence diagram and ACL protocols created at this stage of the project can be seen within *Appendix 2*. It should be noted that the red text on the ACL protocols is space for a variable which depends on what the agents are requesting.

The customer element of the sequence diagram is broken into four interactions. The first is the customer generating an order and sending it to the manufacturer, the second and third are both receiving responses to their order (accepted or rejected), and lastly the manufacturer returning a message to inform the customer the order is completed. It should be noted that the customer creating the order is always the start of the process shown in the diagram, and them receiving their order is always the end. In the full system, this will run three times per day, one for each customer in the system.

The manufacturer element of the sequence diagram runs as a single interaction. This is because although parts will be ordered to replace those used, the order will still be attempted to be completed with parts currently stored in the warehouse. During the process of working on building the order, the manufacturer will always attempt to order parts to replace those used, since there is no benefit to ordering parts in bulk.

The supplier is also a single interaction, being to receive an order, confirm the order, prepare the order, then complete and send the order. The manufacturer can potentially order from two different suppliers at a time, depending on if the system determines ordering from both to be more beneficial than ordering from only one. The supplier has no rejection state in this system since the environment is unchanging, where suppliers each have an unlimited amount of stock for each of their items.

There is no fail state for the phones being built since the system also doesn’t have the capacity to fail in such a way, only taking longer than intended, which incurs a “late fee”.

Model implementation

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Design of manufacturer agent control strategy

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Experimental results

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Conclusions

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References

Groves, W., Collins, J., Gini, M., & Ketter, W. (2014). Agent-assisted supply chain management: Analysis and lessons learned. *Decision Support Systems, 57*(1), 274-284. doi:10.1016/j.dss.2013.09.006

Appendix 1: ontology

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Appendix 2: communication protocols

A close up of a map

Description automatically generated

Appendix 3: source code

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