

Design Document for Kairos Constraint-Based Scheduling Software System

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1 Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

The final goal of the project is to provide a highly customizable, open-source, web-based scheduling tool available to solve a wide range of scheduling problems. Our software system will be accessible through a public website where users may build, modify, and maintain their solutions. The system will be capable of solving various types of scheduling problems for various types of user needs.

Scheduling problems are ubiquitous. Individuals, teams, organizations, and larger entities such as companies all must solve scheduling problems of various levels of complexity. Our tool aims to address the needs of such a wide base of potential users.

1.2 Features and Components

At its core, Kairos will be a web-based schedule solver; it will accept parameters from the user, specifying the details of their particular scheduling problem. The tool will analyze the input and algorithmically determine a schedule that will meet all of the supplied parameters. If meeting all of the constraints is not possible, it will prioritize based on weights and determine what compromises to make in the schedule.

Since the tool will be web-based, it will be open to any and all potential users. This will further encourage a wide breadth of users.

By keeping the core schedule solver as general as possible, we intend to make the tool as customizable as possible. We want users to have access to the powerful core components while maintaining sufficient flexibility to fit the solution to their specific needs.

Part of this customizability will come from working hard to make the API as clear and thorough as possible. A great piece of software may lose potential users if it is not clear to users how best to leverage the software. We intend to encourage a large user base by putting a lot of emphasis on creating a strong API.

Likewise, a great piece of software that lacks intuitiveness or a pleasing user experience will alienate users. We will put a great deal of thought and planning into determining how best to use visualization tools to represent our data. Since scheduling is a complex problem that produces data that will need to be viewed from several angles, this is a difficult problem in itself. By making visualization a priority we hope to attract users as opposed to driving them away.

1.3 Justification

Making this tool available to the public will potentially save individuals a great deal of time, may provide organizations better scheduling solutions than they currently have, and could potentially save a great deal of money for businesses and other organizations. At the very least it is our hope that we will make life a little easier for as many users as possible.

2 Background

2.1 Overview

The task of creating optimal schedules is a problem that event planners, groups, teams, and other organizations of all sizes encounter on a regular basis. The schedules used by these groups are often created manually. For all but the simplest schedules, this task is extremely complicated and time consuming. As the complexity increases, the difficulty of creating acceptable schedules, much less optimal ones, increases exponentially.

Moving as much of the work of scheduling from a manual process to one that is solved by a computer is the inspiration for Kairos. Kairos has the potential to save a great deal of time for users. Kairos will provide a better solution for those who need to schedule any but the simplest of events.

Since scheduling is a ubiquitous problem, Kairos will be usable to large number of users. By implementing a well-documented API we intend to attract those who seek a solution that they can tweak to fit their specific needs.

A specific use case that we have identified is the School of Computing at the University of Utah. We are working with staff in the department to provide a solution to their problem of scheduling classes each semester.

2.1.1 Similar Ideas

We have identified two software systems that address the scheduling problem in some manner similar to that which we are aiming at. These systems are Aurora Intelligent Planning and Scheduling System (Aurora) and Microsoft Project (MS Project). To be sure, there are other software systems out there, but these are adequate to represent the current state of this space.

2.1.2 How Kairos is Different

Based on their literature, Aurora addresses the needs that we are attempting to address more than adequately. However, they are focused on supplying solutions to very large organizations with correspondingly very large scheduling problems. We would like to address the needs of the smaller users for which the Aurora software would be overkill.

While MS Project does include scheduling tools in the software package, the larger goal of MS Project is to provide project management software. Thus, their software is attempting to address a problem with a wider scope than we are focused on. Based on reading the literature on their software, it is not clear that the scheduling tools provided in MS Project are constraint-based scheduling tools.

Both Aurora and MS Project cost money. Our software will be free. Neither Aurora or MS Project are web-based, but require installation on any machine that will use the software. There is certainly room for our tool in this space.

2.2 Required Technology

Our project can be broken down into three main components: a core web service, specific modules that connect to it, and an API that handles communication between the two. We will discuss the technologies we plan to utilize in developing each of these three components.

2.2.1 Core Web Service

This is where the logic for the schedule solver will live. This web service will be centered around the transfer of data through requests and responses. Our web service will use API keys to restrict access. In order to authenticate users, we will store these keys in a MySQL database. This will make our web service more secure.

2.2.2 SoC Module

We will create a module for the School of Computing that connects to our web service. This module will be a web application that allows the user to specify the events (classes) to be scheduled, the resources to be used (professors, rooms, etc.), and the constraints for both classes and resources. When the web service sends back a suggested schedule, the user will be provided with different options for viewing the data. We also plan to provide some web scraping tools in order to facilitate the collection of data relevant to scheduling classes.

This module will have a PHP backend, along with a MySQL database. The front end will be built using HTML, JavaScript, and CSS. We will utilize jQuery (specifically ajax) to make asynchronous requests to the web service without interrupting the user experience.

2.2.3 API

Our API will use JSON to represent the data being shuttled back and forth between the web service and the modules which connect to it. We plan to provide detailed documentation that will help other developers leverage our service in their own applications. To make this documentation readily available and accessible,

we will create a website where we will publish the API documentation, and also advertise our service. This site will also be where developers can request an API key.

2.3 Assets and Engines

The websites we create – both the API documentation site and the School of Computing module – will be built using the Laravel Artisan PHP framework. This will provide structure to our web sites, as well as allow us to keep our code organized and concise. Laravel also includes a command line interface which will provide us with shortcuts for common tasks, thus allowing us to focus our efforts on more important development tasks.

2.4 Software/Hardware Requirements for Users

Since Kairos will be a web application with all of the intensive computation taking place on our network, the only system requirements for users will be a machine running a modern browser with a reasonably fast internet connection.

A Use Cases

A.1 Entering Data Manually to Create a New Schedule

A credentialed user or a guest will manually type in the data required for Kairos to generate a proposed schedule. The steps for this use case are:

1. User navigates to Manual Data Entry page
2. User enters classes and selects 'Next'
3. User enters rooms and selects 'Next'
4. User enters professors and selects 'Next'
5. User enters constraints on room availabilities and selects 'Next'
6. User enters constraints on professor availabilities and selects 'Create Schedule'

A.2 Uploading a CSV File to Create a New Schedule

A credentialed user will generate a proposed schedule by uploading the required data via a .csv file. The steps for this use case are:

1. User navigates to CSV Import page
2. User enters file path for file to upload and selects 'Next'
3. User maps columns from the file to classes, rooms, professors, room constraints, professor constraints and selects 'Create Schedule'

A.3 Modifying a Proposed Schedule

The user will select events (classes) in an existing schedule to be modified and submit the modified problem parameters to Kairos in order to receive a new proposed schedule. The steps for this use case are:

1. The user right clicks on an instance of an event and selects 'Mark for Modification'
2. Once all events the user wants to modify are thusly marked, the user selects 'Modify Marked Events'
3. For each event, the user modifies the resources/constraints and selects 'Next'
4. Once all modifications are entered, user selects 'Modify Schedule'

A.4 Comparing Two Schedules

A.5 Administrative Tasks