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**ROYAL SIGNALS & RADAR
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**SIMOGEN — AN OBJECT-ORIENTED LANGUAGE
FOR SIMULATION**

Author: C A Arthur

**PROCUREMENT EXECUTIVE,
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ROYAL SIGNALS AND RADAR ESTABLISHMENT

Memorandum 4279

TITLE: SIMOGEN - An Object-Oriented Language for Simulation
AUTHOR: C A ARTHUR
DATE: MARCH 1989

SUMMARY

The Simogen language has been designed specifically to provide a user-friendly environment for computer modellers. It is a heavily object-oriented language, but has been designed to be easy to pick up for the most inexperienced of users, rather than to exploit the full power of the object-oriented paradigm in all cases. This paper looks at the reasons why it was felt necessary to create a new language, and considers the reasons behind the particular design chosen. It also describes the language in outline, and discusses briefly to what extent the language can be said to be object-oriented. Finally, an outline is given of a possible iconic interface for the language, to ease it's use still further.

The support and guidance of Professor R L Grimsdale (Sussex University), during the work described here, is acknowledged.

KEYWORDS Programming Languages Object-oriented Simulation C Smalltalk
Portability Modularity Encapsulation User Interface Icons Windows

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Simogen language has been developed within the Battlefield Systems group at the Royal Signals and Radar Establishment, Malvern. It was designed to provide a programming language for users of the Battlefield Sensor Simulator machine, or BSS. The language aims to provide a framework which the user can map his problem onto quickly and easily. A survey of the field, and of the programming paradigms available, indicated that object-oriented techniques were very well matched to this type of task. Thus a language has been designed and a prototype program generator implemented, which hopes to provide a balance of the power of a full blown object-oriented language, such as Smalltalk, and the simplicity of a teaching language like Pascal.

Despite being written for a very particular purpose the Simogen language is not in any way tied to a particular class of problem, and could be used for a whole range of programming applications. The program generator has been developed in a machine independent way, to run on most machines which have a C compiler.

2. THE SIMOGEN LANGUAGE

2.1 Why a new language?

For the last few years RSRE has been engaged in the development of the Battlefield Sensor Simulator (BSS). This is a large computer system which aims to completely change the process of modelling sensor devices on computers.

Historically, the first stage in testing a new sensor design has been to build a physical prototype. If testing this prototype exposes a flaw in the sensor design there will be a need to revise the design, and then a further prototype must be built and tested; this cycle must be repeated until the design is found to be satisfactory. This process is very costly, both in terms of the time taken to go round each iteration of the loop, and in terms of the money spent on materials and labour each time in building a prototype. Thus there is an urgent need for computer simulation of such devices, so that many of the flaws in the design can be ironed out before the first real model is built, decreasing the number of re-designs needed at this stage and lowering the cost.

For these reasons the simulation of sensors has been widely carried out for many years. The new element provided by the BSS is a drawing together of the kinds of facilities that modellers need. In general, each new sensor model is written from scratch, and the model itself becomes inextricably linked with the environmental information which that particular sensor requires in operation. Therefore in general it would be very difficult for a modeller to take an existing model for a short range radar, written by someone else, and to adapt it for his requirement of modelling a long range bistatic radar. Models are also written in a wide range of languages, and often cannot easily be ported from one computer to another.

The BSS aims to alleviate these problems by providing a common set of facilities to ease the process of writing models. In brief, currently the BSS is driven by a detailed scenario of 48 hours duration, giving the movements of vehicles over a large area. The BSS also provides a database of a range of information about the terrain within this area. Lastly, there are facilities to carry out intervisibility calculations for the user. A full description of the BSS is given in [1].

The BSS is unusual, in that the user carries out all his modelling on his own workstation (in this case a workstation may be quite a large machine, such as a Vax 11/780), and simply asks the BSS questions to obtain the data he needs. This means that the performance of the whole system is not severely down-graded if one user runs a model which requires a great deal of processing power.

In addition to the facilities described the BSS system provides Simogen, a special programming language for writing the sensor models. The language is designed to keep the balance between providing all the constructs needed by modellers, and being simple enough to be picked up quickly and easily. Beyond this Simogen provides not only the means of writing individual models, but also the necessary tools to join them together into networks of arbitrary complexity.

Library models written in Simogen, will be provided for users of the BSS system. These will consist of generic models of common sensors which can be

tuned to represent the behaviour of the users' actual sensor simply by providing a set of parameters.

2.2 Factors influencing the design of the language

2.2.1 The Target User

The Simogen language was designed to aid a specific group of people. They are a mix of engineers, operational analysts, and people from other disciplines with the common goal of modelling some device or group of devices in order to find the answers to their questions. In particular, the people using the BSS would normally not be trained programmers or experienced modellers. Another common factor among the users is likely to be that of having only a few weeks to learn to use the BSS, carry out their simulation, and produce the results.

These points meant that the language needed to be very simple in its basic structure, yet at the same time provide a useful framework and structure to help the user organise his thinking. It was also thought useful that the language should resemble existing languages where possible, for example by using constructs which are similar syntactically to those of Pascal or C.

Further analysis showed that there were a set of highly desirable properties for such a language:-

a/ That it should allow the decomposition of real-world mechanical structures into a set of "black boxes" which communicate strictly defined ways. This property is important because engineers tend to decompose real systems in this way.

b/ That the 'black boxes' can be further broken down in the same way to any number of levels, to reflect the way a real item of equipment can be seen at several levels of complexity.

c/ That the boxes can operate autonomously (so there is no single thread of control running through the program), and that they appear to run concurrently. This is an important feature because it allows a model to accurately reflect the ordering of events in the real equipment.

d/ That the user can create a black box with the properties he desires, and then replicate this as many times as he wishes. For example, to model a communications network he might define the black box for one node in the network, then create a running program with 20 copies of this. In many conventional languages this would not be so easily achieved, and the user would be drawn into making a decision on how to map the network onto the constructs provided.

These requirements indicated that many of the properties of object-oriented languages would be very appropriate for this type of modelling. A number of object-oriented languages were considered for the task (for example C++ and Smalltalk) and did indeed have very useful properties. Their chief drawback was that they required considerable initial effort in understanding the concepts and learning to use them. For the particular

application involved this learning time was simply not available, and a simpler alternative was needed.

2.2.2 Portability

As mentioned above, the Battlefield Sensor Simulator system requires that the user provides his own computer to run his model on. For this reason a wide range of machines are likely to be used, and for the language recommended for use on the BSS to become a useful tool and provide libraries of sensor models for users, it must be portable to all these machines. This factor further limited the choice of modelling language, since many languages considered were simply not available on a wide enough range of machines (for example, the Smalltalk language was not available on the Hewlett Packard machines which currently make up the majority of workstations).

Languages such as Modula2 [3][5], and Ada[6] were also considered. These are not strictly, fully object-oriented in every way, but have many useful features in common (for example, modularity). The issue of portability again caused problems here, since neither of these languages were available on the broad spectrum of machines needed.

2.3 An Outline of the Simogen Language Philosophy

Since no existing language met both the requirements for ease of use and portability, it was decided to develop a new language to meet these. Therefore, the Simogen language (SIMulation MODEL GENerator), draws heavily on the object-oriented paradigm, but attempts to avoid complexity and difficult concepts wherever possible.

A program in Simogen consists of any number of objects. The object consists of data space, and code which tells the object how to behave. As in the majority of object-oriented languages, objects communicate by passing messages to one another; a message consists of an identifying name, and any number of arguments (but the number and types of these arguments is fully defined when the program is written). In Simogen, an object reacts to a message sent to it, by executing its response for that message.

A Simogen object is like the black boxes described earlier; its internal variables, and the way in which it works are not visible to the outside world, and the only way to communicate with it is by sending a message to it. For each message sent to an object, the user will understand the effect of this, but will not need to know exactly how it is achieved. This means that an object can be fully specified to other objects by stating :

- what global variables it declares
- what types are defined in the globals section
(this is only needed by objects which are defined within this object)
- what messages it is able to receive
- what messages it may send, and to which objects

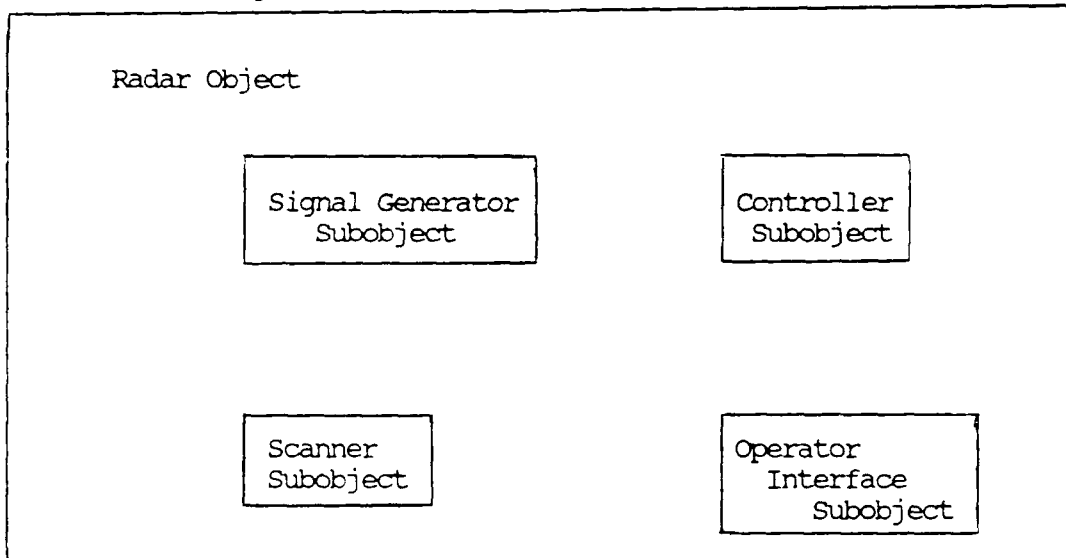
This property of encapsulation of data and the code to act upon it, is very important to this application, since the usefulness of the set of library sensors provided for users will depend heavily on the ease with which they can be interfaced with other models, and configured to meet the users needs. The fact that objects communicate only through predefined messages, and have no way to alter one another's data, means that the danger of unexpected side effects when using several different models is greatly reduced.

When an object sends a message in Simogen, it does not wait for the response for that message to complete, but continues to execute independently. Thus a model in Simogen consists of a set of objects which appear to operate in parallel (this is not actually the case but the Simogen scheduler shares the time among them so that it appears to be so). This feature is very valuable in a language for simulating the real world, because many real world systems carry out several activities at one time. Here Simogen deviates from the standard object-oriented paradigm, since there is normally a single thread of control in object-oriented programs (although other work has been done on combining parallelism with object-oriented ideas [4]).

Simogen's pseudo-parallelism also allows several different activities to be in progress within a single object at any time. This means that the programmer must take care to ensure that a particular order of execution is enforced where necessary; although this may seem to be a problem, it mimics the problems inherent in the real world. Thus, if a model is written to represent closely the behaviour of a real world system, the points where care is needed on the part of the programmer are likely to indicate possible difficulties in the real system.

In Simogen, the code which describes an object is termed its definition. Once an object has been defined, Simogen allows the user to declare as many copies (or instances) of it as he wishes; each of these will have its own data space and operate completely independently of the others. Each instance of a Simogen object must be activated before it can receive or send any messages, and may be terminated when it is no longer required.

The ability of one object to declare instances of another, like any other data type, means that in Simogen objects can be nested. This allows the model to be decomposed in the same way as the engineer views the real system. For example, a radar could be modelled as a radar object, which contains 4 other objects as shown :-



-the Signal Generator object would be responsible for generating a representation of the signal that this type of radar would receive, given information on the environment around it. It would then pass it on to the Operator Interface for displaying.

-the Scanner would represent the scanning motion of the radar. Using information on the arc of coverage of the radar and its scanning speed, this could calculate at any point in time the orientation of the radar.

-the Operator Interface would provide the users view of the simulation, creating a screen like that of the radar being simulated. To do this it would take the returned signal calculated by the Signal Generator and translate this to a screen image (trace). It would also accept user commands to change parameters of the radar (for example the scan rate or scan pattern).

-the Controller object would provide the coordination between the other objects, converting the users requests from the Operator Interface to messages for the other subsystems.

Through this kind of approach, the object concept can be mapped cleanly onto the sub-systems of the equipment being simulated.

The ability to nest objects is not present in many other object-oriented languages, but provides a very useful structure for the decomposition of machinery. It can be seen as analogous to the top down functional

decomposition approach in procedural languages, which provides the user with a powerful method of breaking down large problems into procedures and functions in a controlled way. In Simogen problems can be broken down in terms of objects, which not only reflect the activity required, but can also encapsulate the data representing the current state of this part of the system (in a procedural language any persistent data would usually have to be stored outside a given procedure and passed to it as a parameter).

2.4 Solving the Portability Problem

The method chosen to provide the necessary portability was to convert the user's program in Simogen to a widely available programming language, and then allow the compiler for this language on the user's machine, to compile it down to machine code. Clearly the Simogen program generator must also be written in the same programming language.

In this case, the C language was chosen, for the following main reasons :-

- The C language is very widespread. This means that many new users will already have a C compiler on the machine which they intend to use for modelling. Alternatively, they will be able to obtain one quite cheaply and easily.
- It is comparatively standard over a wide range of machines. Preliminary tests have shown that arbitrarily large and complex programs can be ported between a range of machines with few or no changes. The newly formed ANSI standard for the C language should help further in this area.
- C is a fairly simple but flexible base language. It has a comprehensive library of string handling routines, common to most implementations; this is most useful for the large amounts of text processing required in a program generator (much of the C code output is formed directly by copying and manipulating the input text). Its simplicity and comparative lack of structure also makes it easy to create the program generator output in C, translating from the Simogen language with its strong modularity and special scoping rules. To attempt to map the scoping of Simogen onto a language which had its own strong rules in this area, might be considerably more awkward.
- The simplicity of C tends to lead to efficient compilers for it, allowing the two stage translation from Simogen to machine code still to be accomplished reasonably quickly.

The internal coding of each section within an object is procedural and quite conventional in nature. It was felt that, whilst the object paradigm provides a very natural way of decomposing the mechanical world, people generally seem to describe each activity which a piece of equipment can carry out as a sequential list of instructions. Procedural code provides the closest mapping to this way of describing things.

2.5 A look at the syntax of Simogen

An object in Simogen is divided into a number of sections, as follows:-

```
object OBJ_NAME is
    globals
    locals
    initialise
    responses
    demons
    definitions
endobject OBJ_NAME
```

All of the sections are optional. Taking the sections in order:-

- the globals section holds those variables which are to be seen by other objects outside, but which cannot be altered by them. The globals area might, for example, be used to store the position in grid coordinates of a sensor device being modelled, so that other devices (modelled as objects) could take into account its effects.
- the locals section contains the declaration of variables which are to be visible throughout the object, but invisible outside it.
- the initialise section contains program code, which will be run when the object is activated. This piece of code may terminate, or may contain a loop which keeps running for all or part of the objects life (this allows the modelling of a continuing background activity in an object).
- the responses section tells the object how it must respond when it receives specific messages. Each response follows the form :-

```
on message [MESSAGE_NAME, int n, char c,...]
do
:
:
```

Thus, the range of messages which a given object can receive is defined at compile time, and the user can be informed at this point of any unrecognised messages.

- the demons section. A demon is a piece of code which can be set to execute whenever a particular event occurs. It takes the form :-

```
on activation of OBJECT_NAME
```

```

do
:
:

or

on termination of OBJECT_NAME
do
:
:

or

on change in VARIABLE_NAME
do
:
:

```

A demon can be set on any variable in the object where it appears, and can be triggered on the activation of a subobject, the termination of a subobject, or on a change in the value of a variable. Demons can also be set on the global variables in other objects; this could be useful, for example, in monitoring the movements of some object. Demons could also be useful in developing an object which watches the changes occurring in another object when debugging a program, printing out useful information for the user. Once the program is operating correctly, the debugging object can simply be left out without any other change to the code, to get rid of the debugging information.

- the definitions section contains the definitions of any sub-objects and of functions. The sub-objects follow exactly the same format as their surrounding object; the purpose of placing the subobject definitions inside this object, will be to indicate that it will only be used here (these definitions will be out of scope outside this object).

2.5.1 Functions

Functions, in Simogen, can be defined in the definitions sections of objects, or at the outermost level of a program. They are not the main means of program decomposition as in Pascal or Modula, but are provided to allow routines used frequently within an object to be written once as a function, and also to allow access to existing C language libraries of functions for mathematics, string handling etc.

2.5.2 An Example

To conclude the section on Simogen syntax, an example is given below of a very simple program in Simogen :-

```
startobject CONTROL controller;
```

<pre>object GIVE initialise loop begin send [ITEM] to creator.taker; end endobject GIVE</pre>	<pre>object TAKE is responses on message [ITEM] do printf("Thanks\n"); endobject TAKE</pre>
---	---

```
object CONTROL is
locals
  obj GIVE giver;
  obj TAKE taker;
initialise
  activate taker;
  activate giver;
endobject CONTROL
```

It can be seen that the program is divided into 3 objects, defined as GIVE, TAKE, and CONTROL.

GIVE repeatedly sends a message ITEM, with no arguments, to TAKE. TAKE consists only of one response, which receives the message ITEM and prints "Thanks" to the screen.

The CONTROL object serves only to coordinate the other two. It declares an instance of each of GIVE and TAKE, called giver and taker respectively, and activates them. The line at the top of the program beginning "startobject.." tells Simogen which object is to be activated initially. It is then the responsibility of this object to cause the activation of any other objects.

Lastly, the GIVE object sends its message to "creator.taker"; creator is a predefined object identity for all objects, and refers to the object which declared and activated this object. Thus, to refer to taker from giver it is necessary to go via creator; the dot operator following a object name allows names within the objects scope to be referenced (this is the means by which the global variables of another object are referred to).

2.5.3 Time in Simogen

In modelling the real world it is often important to be able to dictate the order in which events occur. When using the Battlefield Sensor Simulator it is also necessary for the user to be able to synchronise his model with the passage of time on the BSS. Simogen provides two measures of time, realtime and scenariotime, the first represents time on the the users system, and the second the passage of time in seconds through the BSS scenario.

Timing can be controlled by means of :-

a/ The delay statement, which causes execution of the particular piece of code to be held up for a given time

b/ Appending timing information to the sending of a message, for example :-

```
        send [ITEM] to creator.taker after 3 minutes, 4 seconds realtime;
or
        send [ITEM] to creator.taker at 10:20:30 scenariotime;
```

2.6 How object-oriented is Simogen?

The following table compares some of the main features of Simogen with Smalltalk.

	Smalltalk	Simogen
Sees the world as objects	yes	yes
Communication by predefined messages	yes (methods)	yes (responses)
Many instances of an object once defined	yes (classes)	yes
Inheritance	yes	no
Dynamic creation	yes	no

To summarise, Simogen has many of the features of an object-oriented language, but omits certain key properties (notably inheritance). It has a distinctly object-oriented flavour to it, and insofar as Ada has been considered to be object-oriented, Simogen quite definitely is. However, it does not pursue all the possible object-oriented properties to their limit as in a language such as Smalltalk.

3. IDEAS FOR AN ICONIC USER INTERFACE

Early in the history of computing all programs had to be written in machine code. This meant that the programmer needed to know in detail about the architecture of the machine he was using (for example the number of registers provided, their size, and any differences in their function). Computer languages have evolved, through assembly language to Fortran, and then on to Pascal-like languages. At each step the gap between the user's perception of the problem to be solved, and the way in which he must express it for the machine, has narrowed. The Simogen language closes this gap still further for those who model complex machinery, by providing a way of structuring programs which closely reflects their view of the problem. The iconic interface will try to provide yet another level of abstraction which allows models to be put together or tuned and run, without any understanding of the code at all.

The next section describes a possible iconic interface for Simogen.

3.1 Some possible features for the interface

Working with the iconic interface the user will be presented with a set of symbols, each of which represents one of the sensors models available to him (for example, one might be a small picture of a radar, another a thermal imager). The user can select an icon by moving the cursor onto it (using one of number of input devices, for example a mouse or special keys on the keyboard), and can then move it to group it with others. This allows him to collect together all the different sensor models which he wishes to use in his simulation. He can also display a map of part of the BSS area, and can position the icons on the map to set up their positions (this makes it easy to select a location for a sensor quickly and visually (the user can simply locate a high point by the contour lines on the map, and move the sensor to it)).

The user's simulation program can then be created interactively. After collecting the icons which he wishes to use, he must configure the models to suit his needs (default values will be provided for all sensors, so that first attempts at a model can be constructed without this step). For each different icon the user will be able to call up a menu which will allow him to select from a list of the operations allowed on that model. This might include :-

View details

- this option might lead to a screen providing basic information on the object, such as :-
 - its position,
 - its state (probably one of not yet activated,
 - active,
 - finished (possible only when an object cannot respond to any messages)
 - or terminated).

View spec

- Look at the specification of the object in terms of the messages which it sends, those which it receives, the global variables it has, and what objects it assumes the presence of (ie which objects it sends messages to, or refers to the global variables of)

View settings

- This could allow the user to look at the settings of variables which configure the particular sensor being used, and alter these if required. The aim of this is to provide a means of tuning existing sensors for a particular simulation without the user needing to read and understand the code for them. The variables included here might be those in the object's globals section. An example of this might be the case where the user wishes to set up a wired communication network. Each node in the network might have the settings

My_Id - a unique string which can be used to identify this node

Rx rate

Tx rate - the rates (probably in baud units), at which the node will receive data and transmit it

Fail Rate - a measure of the likelihood of the node failing

The user could move through this list changing values to his particular desired settings.

Open

- look at and if necessary, edit, the code of the object in the BSS language (for library models it will normally be possible for the user to edit his local copy of the code, but not to change the library version).

Activate

- start an object running.

Terminate

- Stop an object running (making it unable to receive further messages).

The user will also be able to duplicate an icon as many times as he wishes to create several separate models of the sensor in his simulation.

Finally, he will be able to connect up the individual sensor models, telling each where it fits into the overall model, and which others it is to communicate with (for example, in an exercise in data fusion, the sensor models would all be told to send their reports to the same fusion object, which would then attempt to correlate them). The user could then call up a network diagram to show the links which he had set up.

The iconic interface will be developed under the X-windows system to allow porting to any machine which supports this. It will hopefully provide a means of building a simulation from existing models without the user needing to deal with the program code at all.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has described the principles behind the programming language Simogen. The degree to which it is 'object-oriented' has been considered, and the conclusion drawn that it has a strongly object-oriented flavour, but is not so fully object-oriented as languages such as Smalltalk. Finally ideas for an iconic interface to work on top of Simogen and allow models to be created without the need for any programming knowledge at all, has been described briefly.

A prototype compiler for Simogen has been implemented (with one or two minor omissions). It currently runs on Hewlett Packard 9040, and 350 machines, but should be readily portable to many other machines.

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Abstract The Simogen language has been designed specifically to provide a user-friendly environment for computer modellers. It is a heavily object-oriented language, but has been designed to be easy to pick up for the most inexperienced of users, rather than to exploit the full power of the object-oriented paradigm in all cases. This paper looks at the reasons why it was felt necessary to create a new language, and considers the reasons behind the particular design chosen. It also describes the language in outline, and discusses briefly to what extent the language can be said to be object-oriented. Finally, an outline is given of a possible iconic interface for the language, to ease it's use still further.				

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