Building Distributed Simulations Utilizing the EAAGLES Framework

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ABSTRACT

The Extensible Architecture for the Analysis and Generation of Linked Simulations (EAAGLES) software is a framework for the design of robust, scalable, virtual, constructive, stand-alone, and distributed simulation applications. Its design integrates concepts from both virtual and constructive simulations to achieve an optimal blend of both.

The Simulation and Analysis Facility (SIMAF) located at WPAFB, Ohio, participates in a number of distributed events each year. The vast majority of the distributed simulation software used in the facility has been "home grown" utilizing the EAAGLES framework which provides native interfaces to the Distributed Interactive Simulation (DIS) protocol and High Level Architecture (HLA). Applications built utilizing the framework include cockpits (F-16), ground control stations (Predator MQ-9), threat Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADS) and a futuristic battle manager. Interfaces to other systems, such as Simulink-based models, have also been developed.

This paper describes the distributed software architecture and explains how to take advantage of low-cost dual processor PCs to support real-time simulation systems.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Douglas D. Hodson is an Electrical Engineer at the Simulation and Analysis Facility, Wright Patterson Air Force Base AFB, OH. He is the technical lead of the Extensible Architecture for the Analysis and Generation of Linked Simulations (EAAGLES) software framework. This framework is currently being used to support the development of both virtual and constructive and stand-alone and distributed simulation applications. He received a B.S. in Physics from Wright State University in 1985, and both an M.S. in Electro-Optics in 1987 and an M.B.A. in 1999 from the University of Dayton. He is also a graduate student and Adjunct Instructor at the Air Force Institute of Technology working towards his Ph.D. in Computer Engineering.

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INTRODUCTION

The Simulation and Analysis Facility (SIMAF) located at Wright Patterson AFB (WPAFB), Ohio participates in a number of distributed simulation activities each year that include live, virtual (human-in-the-loop) and constructive players/entities. The majority of the distributed simulation applications have been developed using the Extensible Architecture for the Analysis and Generation of Linked Simulations (EAAGLES) software framework.

EAAGLES is a simulation design pattern that provides a structure for constructing simulation applications. The framework aids the design of robust, scalable, virtual, constructive, stand-alone, and distributed simulation applications. It leverages modern object-oriented software design principles while incorporating fundamental real-time system design techniques to meet human interaction requirements.

By providing abstract representations of system components (that the object-oriented design philosophy promotes), multiple levels of fidelity can be easily intermixed and selected for optimal runtime performance. Abstract representations of systems allow a developer to tune the application to run efficiently so that human-in-the-loop interaction latency deadlines can be met. On the flip side, constructive-only simulation applications that do not need to meet time-critical deadlines can use models with even higher levels of fidelity.

The framework embraces the Model-View-Controller (MVC) software design pattern by partitioning functional components into packages. This concept is taken a step further by providing an abstract network interface so custom protocols can be implemented without affecting system models. Examples include the Distributed Interactive Simulation (DIS) protocol and the High Level Architecture (HLA) interfaces.

Specific applications using the framework to support simulation activities include representative F-16 cockpits, an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) ground control station (Predator MQ-9), Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADS) and a futuristic battle manager.

FRAMEWORKS, TOOLKITS & APPLICATIONS

A framework is a set of cooperating classes that make up a reusable design for a specific class of software (Deutsch, 1989; Johnson, 1988). A framework is customized to a particular application by creating application-specific subclasses of abstract classes from the framework (Gamma, 1995). A toolkit is a set of related and reusable classes that provide useful, general-purpose functionality. They are the object-oriented equivalent of subroutine libraries (Gamma, 1995).

EAAGLES itself is not an application. Applications are stand-alone executable software programs like Microsoft Word. They typically satisfy a particular need.

EAAGLES is an object-oriented modeling and simulation framework coded in C++. It is partitioned into packages that serve as functional toolkits for the developer. One example would be the EAAGLES graphics toolkit, which facilitates the development of operator/vehicle interfaces and displays.

The framework enables the creation of a diverse set of simulation applications. Derived simulation applications using the framework can be run stand-alone or distributed. Distributed applications can interoperate with other systems and simulations through DIS and/or HLA interfaces. The application might include software agents that represent human participation (constructive), or it might need to interact with a real human participant (virtual).

HUMAN INTERACTION & VIRTUAL SIMULATION

Simulations that interact with human participants must respond within a prescribed deadline (latency or response time). A simulation that does not respond like the system it is intended to represent will frustrate the operator and may skew the simulation results. Software systems faced with this demanding requirement fall into the category of real-time systems.

Real-time systems are designed and organized so that time-critical (often periodic) tasks can meet their deadlines. Two standard approaches to scheduling tasks include priority-based and foreground/background systems. Priority-based designs assign a priority to each task in the system. The task with the highest priority that is ready to run is executed first. The scheduling of the task resides with the operating system.

In a foreground/background system the application controls the scheduling of tasks. Foreground tasks are executed with the help of a jump-list, or a managed list of pointers to functions (tasks). Tasks are executed one after another as defined by the list order. Aperiodic events and background tasks receive processing time after all the "highest priority" tasks in the list have finished.

EAAGLES is a foreground/background system, but instead of managing a jump-list (or a list of functions to process), scheduling is interwoven into the object hierarchy. It is specifically designed to take advantage of low-cost dual processor PCs which allow the creation of a time-critical foreground thread. Because multiple processors are available, reliable execution of a time-critical thread is assured with general purpose operating systems such as Windows and Linux.

It should be emphasized that EAAGLES is a cycle or frame-based system, not a discrete-event simulator. This approach satisfies the requirements for which it is designed; namely, support for models of varying levels of fidelity including higher level "physics-based" models, digital signal processing models and the ability to meet real-time performance requirements. Model state can be captured with state machines and state transitions can use the message passing mechanisms provided by the framework.

AN OBJECT-ORIENTED REAL-TIME FRAMEWORK

EAAGLES is an object-oriented C++ simulation framework. C++ was chosen since:

- Most real-time systems are developed in C for performance reasons (Laplante, 2004). Object-oriented languages tend to be viewed with skepticism as overall system performance often outweighs flexibility. But for the modeling and simulation domain, the advantages afforded by an object-oriented language outweighs this slight performance penalty.
- C++ is portable and compilers exist on virtually every platform. This allows developers to build EAAGLES-based applications on any of the major popular operating systems (Windows, Linux, IRIX, Solaris, etc).
- C++ is flexible.
- It is desirable to define memory management so it does not interfere with the overall performance of the application. Therefore, the use of the New/Delete operators is preferable to garbage collection.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover each and every class defined in the framework, but a few key classes deserve attention in order to gain insight into the structure of the framework.

Object : The *Object* class is the C++ system object for the EAAGLES framework. Unlike other object oriented languages (for example Java or Ruby), the C++ language does not provide a system object. C++ also does not provide native garbage collection. While lacking these two features could be viewed as a negative when comparing the native features of various languages, it is a positive when the application domain consists of applications that need to meet real-time requirements.

C++ provides the flexibility to define how these mechanisms work for different application domains. For example, if the developer is writing an application in which "control" over potentially time-consuming memory management operations is of little concern, the framework provides smart pointers to automatically manage the creation and deletion of objects. If, on the other hand, the application has time constraints to meet (i.e. a real-time system), the "uncontrolled" creation and destruction of objects will lead to performance problems. One of *Object*s capabilities is to provide a simple reference counting system for the memory management of all framework objects. *Object* provides access to this system so that a developer can manually control and tune performance-oriented applications, if they arise; for example, the processing, in real-time, of modeled radio frequency (RF) emission packets or infrared radiation (IR) geometry information.

The other subtle but important aspect to providing a system object appears in the form of typechecking. The presence of a system object, and the derivation of all classes from it, enables the dynamic casting of objects. It also avoids the pitfalls associated with untyped functions and classes. The EAAGLES coding standard explicitly prohibits the use of void pointers for this very reason.

Component : In object-oriented programming, a container class is a class of objects that contain other objects. The EAAGLES component class is that and much more. *Component* is a container for other components. *Component* also defines a basic messaging system that is used throughout the framework.

From the outset, the EAAGLES framework is designed to facilitate the creation of simulation applications that execute in real-time and/or interact with a human participant. Applications with time constraints and latency/response deadlines typically separate time-critical tasks and non-time-critical tasks; for example, the execution of an aerodynamic model at a specific frequency as opposed to writing data to a hard disk, or printing a document.

This separation is facilitated by two methods in the component class. When designing a model in the framework, code that needs to execute in a time-critical manner (usually mathematical calculations) is placed in an overridden virtual *updateTC* (update time-critical) method. Code that can be run in a non-time-critical manner is placed in the overridden virtual *updateData* method.

This organization of code has a number of advantages:

- Since time-critical code is clearly separated from background code, applications can be designed to meet performance requirements.
- All the code (time-critical and background) associated with a model is logically within the same class.

Stepping back, one can view an instance of a simulation application as nothing more than a tree of *Component*s as in Figure 1. A call to the top (or root) of the tree's *updateTC* method, will automatically execute every subcomponent's *updateTC*. In other words, every component will execute the code of its children. This process continues until the entire tree has been processed. The same process takes place for the background code.

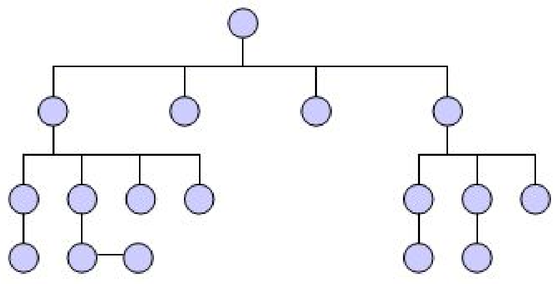

Figure 1: Component Tree

The EAAGLES coding standard spells out basic rules to follow when writing code in *updateTC* (example: no blocking I/O calls). These rules parallel many of the rules used when designing real-time systems.

SIMULATION ARCHITECTURE

A developer using the EAAGLES framework as a basis for a simulation typically builds an application by either using existing classes (or models) or extends them to add new functionality. Then the developer writes the mainline (*main()*) for the application.

The mainline usually has the following structure:

- Read an input file that describes the class/object hierarchy and associated attributes. EAAGLES provides a parser (written with Flex and Bison) that can read a simple context-free scheme-like input language.
- Setup the threads as desired. For applications without real-time requirements (e.g., a constructive-only application that processes a series of batch runs) a single thread is all that is needed. For a virtual simulation with time-critical code, a time critical (or high priority) thread should be created.
- Start the simulation by calling *updateTC* and *updateData* as required. If it is a virtual simulation or a simulation where real-time performance is important, the time-critical thread will call the *updateTC* method of the root node.

Full control of the mainline is in the hands of the developer for maximum flexibility. EAAGLES does not even provide a *main()* function! Furthermore, application mainlines tend to be short and sweet. Most of the work is in the design and extension of new classes.

Simulation applications are typically organized like the structure as shown in Figure 2. Thinking in terms of a tree of components, the class *Station* resides at

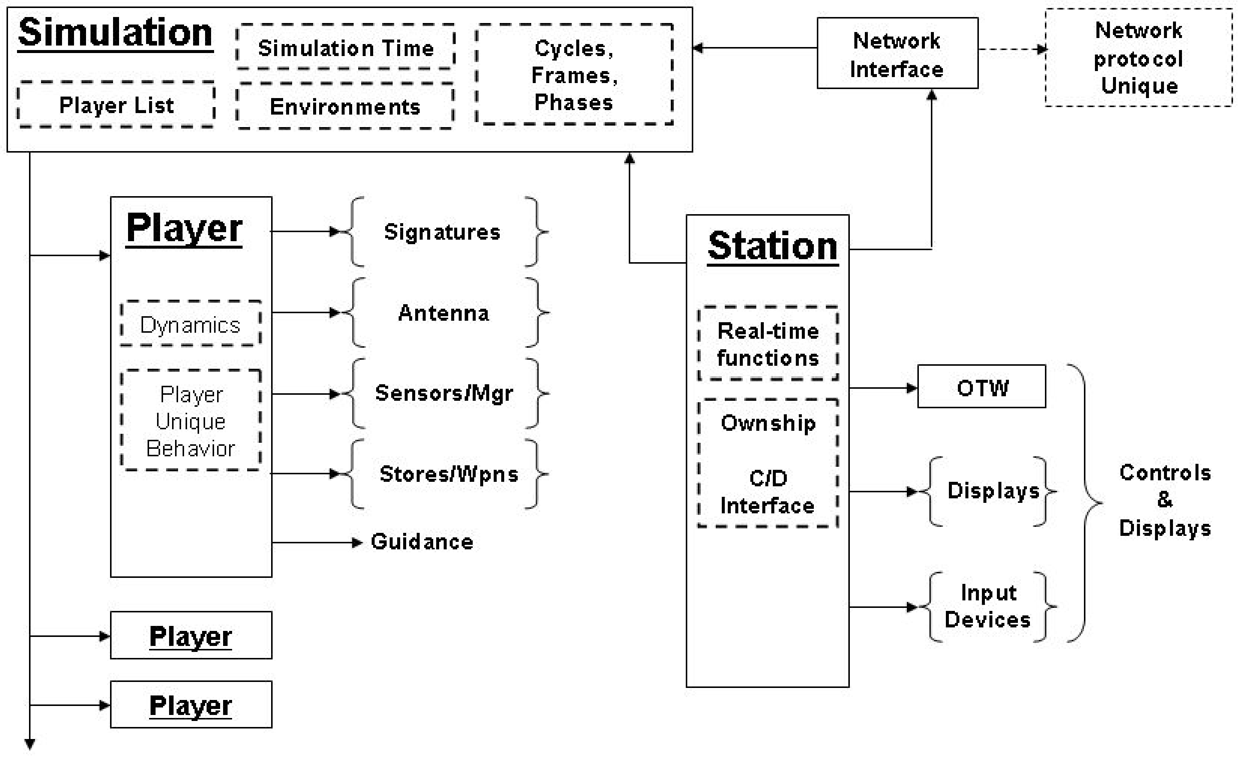

Figure 2: Structure of Simulations

the top, or the root node. Every other component is a subcomponent of *Station*.

Station connects models to views (or graphical displays) and controls. As mentioned earlier, the EAAGLES framework embraces the Model-View-Controller (MVC) software design pattern. *Station* also owns an instance of the *Simulation* object which manages a list of players (entities), keeps track of simulation time, which includes the cycle, frame and phase that is currently being processed.

Being a frame-based system (not a discrete-event simulator), delta time is passed as an argument to *updateTC* so proper calculations involving time can be performed. Having models rely on delta time for calculation means the frequency of the entire system can change without having to change each and every model (so long as Nyquist rates are met). Additional time related information is recorded in terms of cycles (16 frames or sometimes called a major frame) and phases. Phases sequence the flow of data throughout a model. Four phases are currently defined:

- Dynamics – update player or system dynamics including aerodynamic, propulsion, and sensor positions (e.g., antennas, IR seekers).
- Transmit – R/F emissions, which may contain datalink messages, are sent during this phase. The parameters for the R/F range equation, which include transmitter power, antenna pattern, gains and losses, are computed.
- Receive – Incoming emissions are processed and filtered, and the detection reports or datalink messages are queued for processing.
- Process – Used to process datalink messages, sensor detection reports and tracks, and to update state machines, on-board computers, shoot lists, guidance computers, autopilots or any other player or system decision logic.

A *Player* is a subclass of component that adds dynamics and other unique behaviors. Some components that can be "attached" include signatures, antennas, sensors and stores. Derived air and ground players are included within the framework.

An abstract interoperability network interface is defined so specific protocols can be incorporated, such as DIS, for interacting with other distributed simulation applications. This network interface automatically creates new players in the player list. As far as the simulation is concerned, these players are like any other.

GRAPHICS ARCHITECTURE

The framework defines several graphic toolkits for the development of operator/vehicle interface displays. The graphic toolkits are based on OpenGL for all primitive drawing, thus making the framework compatible with virtually any platform.

The foundation for graphics drawing is contained in the *basicGL* package. It contains classes for drawing graphic objects such as bitmaps, input/output fields, fonts, polygons, readouts, textures, and others.

The graphics architecture has key fundamental relationships between the *Graphic*, *Page* and *Display* classes (see Figure 3).

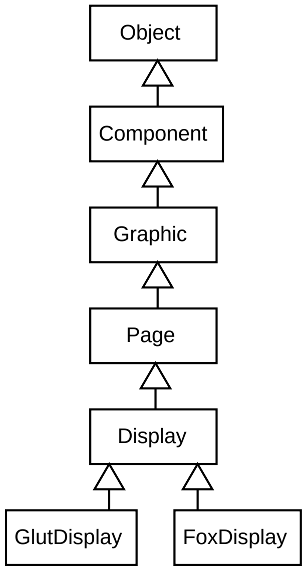

Figure 3: Graphics Class Hierarchy

The *Graphic* class encapsulates attributes associated with a graphic such as color, line width, flash rate (for a graphic that flashes), coordinate transformations, vertices and texture coordinates, select names and scissor box information. Since *Graphic* is a component, it can contain other graphics. *Page* is a "page" of graphics that can facilitate the creation of Multi-Function Displays (MFD) where specific page transition events need to be defined. The *Display* class defines all the resources available for drawing such as fonts, the color table and both the physical and logical dimensions of the display viewport. Finally, open source GUI toolkits (such as Glut, Fox and FLTK) are included in EAAGLES through their respective display classes.

EAAGLES graphic classes ease the development of operator/vehicle displays and leverage open source GUI toolkits, but they are not intended to replace visual scenegraph displays (such as heads up displays). The overarching philosophy of EAAGLES is to avoid reinventing the graphics "wheel".

Higher level toolkits that use this structure include the instrument library which includes dials, buttons, gauges, meters, pointers, and countless other fully functional instruments, along with simple maps. The moving map library is another such library.

All of the graphical toolkits are independent of the simulation modeling environment. Models don't have any knowledge of graphics and graphics have no knowledge of models. The code that connects the two resides within the application and is typically associated with the *Station* class.

Through an *ownship* pointer in the *Station* class, the controls and displays of any player can be switched at anytime. Switching from player to player is useful for observing simulation interactions from different perspectives.

All of the graphics classes are derived from *Graphic* which is derived from *Component*. Being a component, all time-critical code can be written into the *updateTC* method and background processing can be written into the *updateData* method. Sometimes, in real-time system development, it is desirable to set graphic drawing to an even lower priority than other background processing. Therefore, another method within the *Graphic* class is defined that serves as a placeholder to do actual OpenGL graphics drawing.

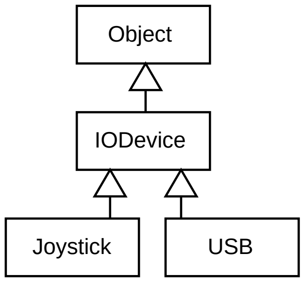

Figure 4: Device Class Hierarchy

A sample application included in an EAAGLES distribution illustrates basic graphics by drawing a "worm" that moves around the screen and "bounces" off the walls. Code for this example is organized as follows. All mathematical calculations for the position, speed and direction of the worm are performed in *updateTC*. All the work to setup what to draw is done in *updateData*. The actual drawing of the

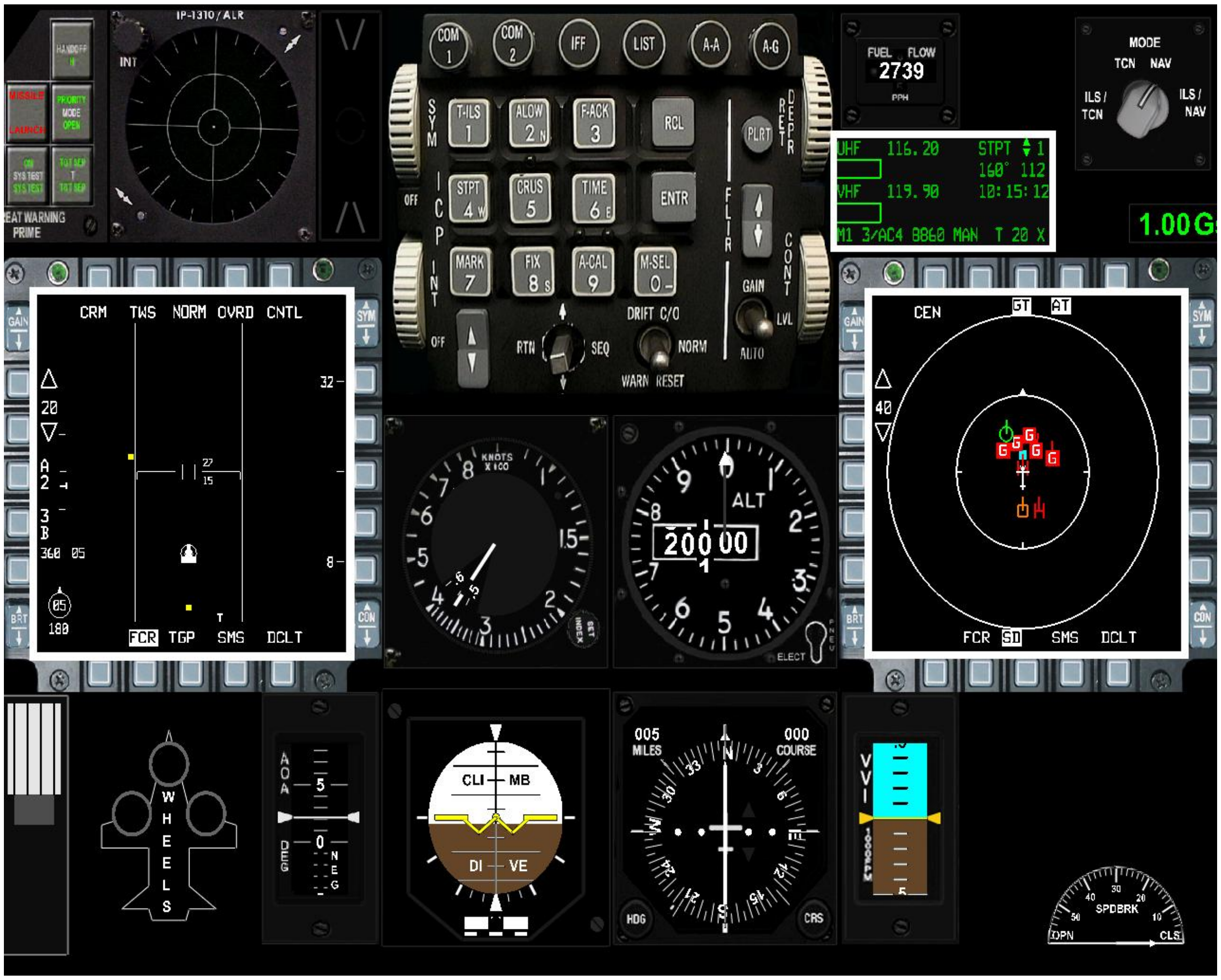

Figure 5: Generic Heads Down Display

graphic is performed by *Graphic*'s draw function.

Organizing code this way enables the application developer to determine how to execute the code and to define threads to meet requirements. For this example, a thread is set up to execute time-critical mathematical calculations associated with the worm in "real-time", and in a non-time-critical manner the operating system (or Glut in this case) draws the worm during idle times.

DEVICE I/O ARCHITECTURE

The EAAGLES framework abstracts I/O devices so each hardware interface appears to the application developer as nothing more than a device with a number of analog (axis) and digital (button) values as shown in Figure 4. This deviceIO package has interface code for several platforms that support joysticks, USB devices, BG System serial boxes and Keithley PCI digital acquisition cards.

Once the device is initialized, a call to the virtual receive method, defined in the *IODevice* class, obtains the latest values from the device. Information about button transitions can also be determined as well as the definition of deadbands for analog inputs.

The *Station* class defines how axes and buttons are "connected" to the models and views of the simulation application.

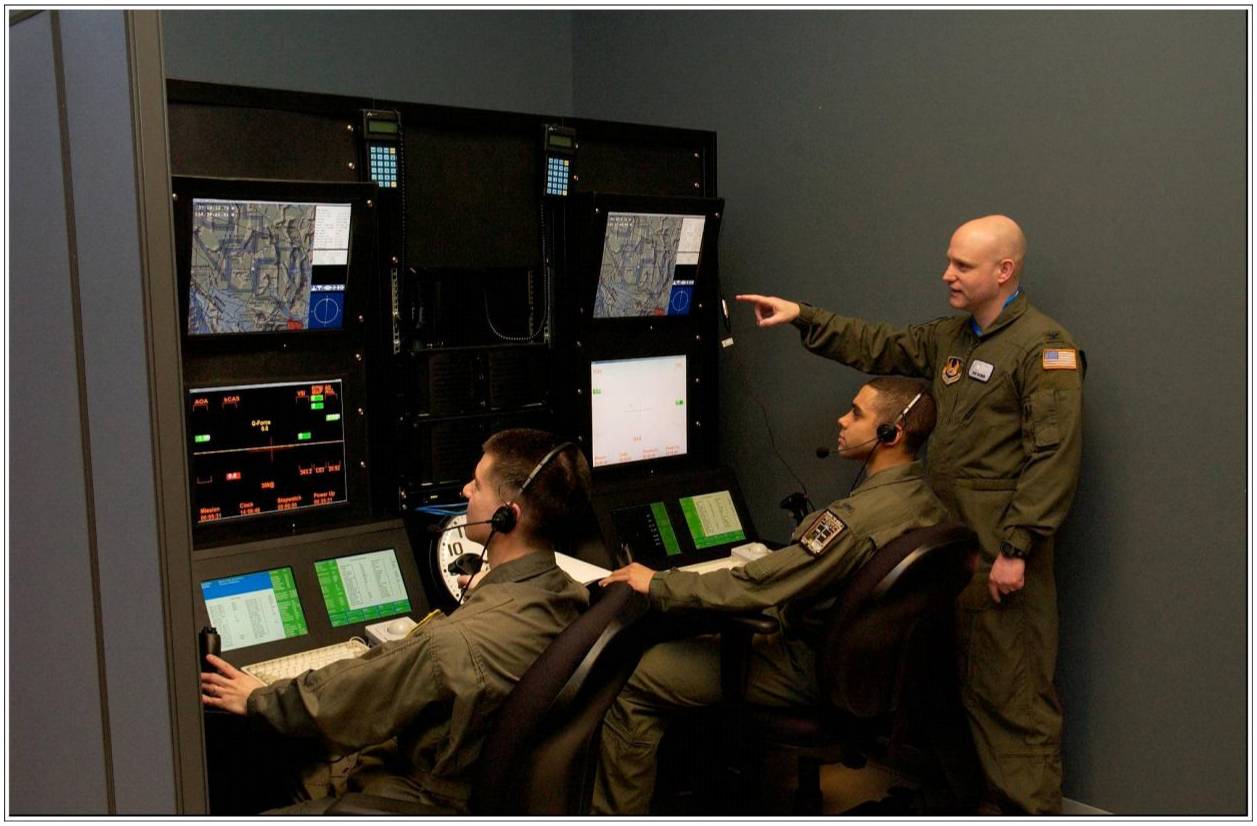

Figure 6: MQ-9 Ground Control Station

FIGHTER COCKPIT

One of the first EAAGLES-based applications developed at the SIMAF facility was a generic fighter cockpit with a generic heads down display. The heads-down display was developed using the graphics toolkit as a foundation (see Figure 5). Window management is controlled by Glut which is a *Display* that contains other *Graphic* objects and *Display*s as highlighted in the figure. The *Display*s have multiple pages of graphics. This work effectively jump started the creation of the instrument library which continues to mature and expand in scope as well as across application domains.

To the casual observer, the fighter application might appear to be nothing more than a pretty cockpit, but it is actually much more. The application driving the cockpit is an entire simulation ready to be connected into a distributed virtual simulation via DIS or HLA. The cockpit itself is set up through the *Station* class where the heads-down display and controls are associated with one of the players in the simulation player list via *ownship* pointer. In other words, the fighter cockpit is really a simulation entity that is being flown by a human operator. Since the controls and displays are logically separate from the player model, switching and controlling different players during a run can be as simple as moving the *ownship* pointer.

This application is used in almost every distributed simulation activity SIMAF participates in or sponsors. It is also used by a number of facilities throughout the different services.

MQ-9 GROUND CONTROL STATION

Compared to the fighter cockpit, the Predator MQ-9 Ground Control Station (GCS) in Figure 6 appears as a completely different simulation application although it is also using the EAAGLES framework. It is a good example of leveraging different frameworks and toolkits to their fullest potential to build an application.

For example, the real GCS controls a Predator with two sets of control sticks. One set controls or flies the Predator directly, and the other controls the sensor

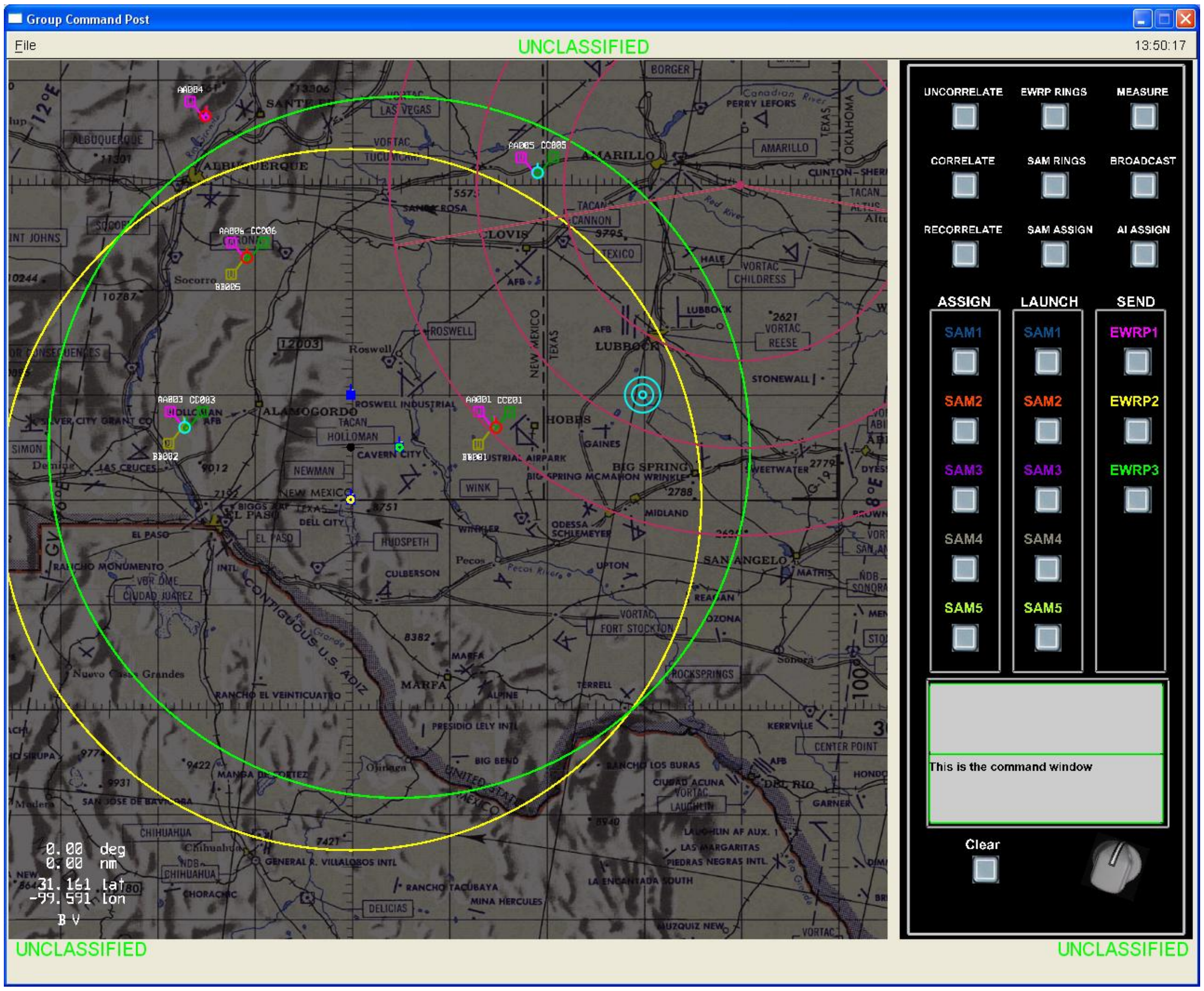

Figure 7: Group Command Post

ball attached to the UAV. Four displays are presented to the operators: a tracker display in which the operator defines and uploads routes for the Predator to follow; a visual of what the sensor ball is looking at; and two lower displays with multiple pages of textual status information.

The ground control station is simulated with a few EAAGLES-based applications and the Fox GUI toolkit which is a windows based application with menus and dialog boxes used to build the tracker application. EAAGLES-based OpenGL graphics draws the tracker map for planning routes.

SubrScene, an Image Generation System (IGS), generates a visual scene of what the sensor ball is viewing and is controlled by another EAAGLES-based application. All control sticks and inputs use the EAAGLES *DeviceIO* library.

SubrScene is freely distributed among the government community. The application is designed to provide a central interface to a clustered real-time rendering system for virtual emersion. It supports standard API's such as the Common Image Generator Interface (CIGI) from Boeing and COTS modeling formats for databases and simulation reuse. Support for modular capabilities, such as plug-ins for both interfaces at the central server and rendering stages, increases unique capabilities.

This application is routinely used by SIMAF in the Air Forces Virtual Flag event conducted several times each year.

GROUP COMMAND POST

The Group Command Post (GCP) is a key component of an overall Integrated Air Defense System (IADS). The GCP receives tracks formed from early warning radar posts and filter centers under its control and develops a sector air picture. It determines which tracks are hostile and assigns the appropriate weapons system to counter the threat directly, by assigning the threat to a surface to air missile, anti-aircraft artillery, airborne interceptor or indirectly assigning the threat to a weapons post responsible for assigning the appropriate weapon system (see Figure 7).

This application, along with two other EAAGLES-based applications (Early Warning Radar Post and SAM site), forms the core of the IADS infrastructure. This infrastructure is used in a number of distributed simulation events including Airborne Electronic Attack (AEA) which examines the impacts of various electronic warfare techniques upon both an enemy's integrated air defense system and blue force capabilities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The EAAGLES framework is designed for the simulation application developer; it is not an application itself. It can be thought of as a simulation design that encourages a certain structure (shown in Figure 2) for a simulation.

The framework embraces the object-oriented paradigm and therefore system abstractions while interweaving design concepts from real-time systems to achieve what we feel is an ideal structure in which to build simulation applications. By partitioning the time-critical code as the framework expects, immediate use of models containing the code in virtual simulation becomes possible.

The framework is routinely compiled with Microsoft Visual Studio for the Windows environment and GCC for Linux. Applications perform best when executed on dual-core or dual-CPU systems because of the priority based threading in these systems. Windows and Linux are both designed for general purpose processing, not real-time processing, thus, one cpu can be dedicated to the operating system kernel which reduces the possibility of interfering with a time-critical task.

EAAGLES is government-owned and not proprietary. It is managed by the SIMAF facility located at WPAFB, OH.

In order to encourage the use of the EAAGLES framework throughout the modeling and simulation community, a nearly fully featured version of the framework has been released into the public domain under the name OpenEaagles. It can be freely downloaded from www.OpenEaagles.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The success of the EAAGLES framework is the direct result of the cooperative efforts of several contractors including L-3 Communications, SAIC, General Dynamics and Booz Allen Hamilton. Each contractor, or more importantly, each person working on "EAAGLES-related" tasks has improved EAAGLES either through direct framework support or using EAAGLES to build new and interesting simulation applications. Their contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

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