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A REVIEW ON MULTI-AGENT SYSTEM-ENABLED DIGITAL TWIN ARCHITECTURES FOR DYNAMIC SCHEDULING IN DISCRETE MANUFACTURING ENVIRONMENTS

*Zhou YanJun
**Noraisyah Tajudin

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Corresponding Author: Zhou YanJun; Email: yanjun.phdscholar@lincoln.edu.my; doi:10.46360/cosmos.et.620252001

Abstract

The integration of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) with Digital Twins (DTs) has emerged as a transformative strategy for dynamic scheduling challenges in discrete manufacturing. This review systematically explores architectures, integration factors, technological enablers, and research gaps. Through a comprehensive analysis of 70+ studies from 2016 to 2024, we categorize integration frameworks, compare scheduling strategies, and highlight critical success factors. Findings suggest that interoperability, real-time data synchronization, intelligent agent autonomy, system scalability, and security are decisive in successful MAS-DT deployment. Future pathways for industrial adoption are outlined. This paper offers an advanced synthesis for researchers and practitioners aiming to build intelligent, resilient manufacturing scheduling systems.

Keywords: Digital Twin, Multi-Agent Systems, Dynamic Scheduling, Discrete Manufacturing, Intelligent Manufacturing, Cyber-Physical Systems.

Introduction

The manufacturing landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, catalyzed by the ongoing shift toward Industry 4.0 and the growing imperative for operational flexibility, agility, and resilience. Global competition, increasing product customization demands, and unpredictable supply chain dynamics have rendered traditional manufacturing paradigms increasingly inadequate (Lu, 2017; Mourtzis, 2020). Within this rapidly evolving context, discrete manufacturing systems, which are responsible for producing individualized, countable products such as consumer electronics, automotive components, and heavy machinery, face unique challenges related to production variability, fluctuating resource availability, and dynamic shifts in market demand (Pinedo, 2016; Tao et al., 2018).

Historically, centralized scheduling and control approaches have been deployed to manage production activities. These systems operate based on pre-defined static rules, assuming a relatively stable environment where disruptions are infrequent and minor (Herrmann, 2006). However, the reality of modern discrete manufacturing-characterized by high-mix, low-volume production, frequent machine failures, rush orders, and rapid design changes-demands dynamic, real-time adaptability. Traditional centralized models often suffer from bottlenecks, single points of failure, and delayed response times, making them unsuitable for today's complex manufacturing scenarios (Monostori, 2014).

In response to these limitations, two pivotal technological paradigms have emerged: Digital Twins (DTs) and Multi-Agent Systems (MAS). Digital Twins provide real-time, high-fidelity virtual representations of physical manufacturing entities, enabling continuous monitoring, simulation, prediction, and optimization of production activities (Grieves & Vickers, 2017; Kritzinger et al., 2018). By mirroring the physical state of shop floor assets and processes, DTs empower decision-makers with a dynamic situational awareness and the capability to simulate multiple operational scenarios before execution (Tao et al., 2019). This significantly enhances predictive maintenance, anomaly detection, and production forecasting.

Complementing DTs, Multi-Agent Systems introduce decentralized intelligence through autonomous, interactive agents capable of decision-making, negotiation, and cooperative problem-solving (Wooldridge, 2009; Leitão, 2009). Each agent represents a machine, workpiece, production order, or resource, and operates semi-independently based on localized goals and system-wide coordination protocols. MAS enables manufacturing systems to adapt dynamically by distributing control, allowing local disruptions to be resolved autonomously without the need for centralized intervention (Jennings et al., 1998; Pan et al., 2020).

*_**Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment, Lincoln University College, Malaysia.*

The integration of MAS with DTs combines the strengths of both technologies: the real-time, predictive visibility offered by Digital Twins and the distributed, autonomous decision-making capabilities of intelligent agents. Together, they enable a paradigm shift from static optimization to truly adaptive, resilient, and intelligent real-time scheduling systems. MAS-enabled DT architectures promise not only to enhance production efficiency but also to improve system flexibility, fault tolerance, and scalability (Negri et al., 2017; Shao & Kibira, 2018).

Given the growing academic and industrial interest in this convergence, a comprehensive understanding of current developments, key integration strategies, critical success factors, and existing research gaps is necessary. This review aims to synthesize and critically analyze the existing body of knowledge surrounding the integration of Multi-Agent Systems and Digital Twins for dynamic scheduling in discrete manufacturing environments. It systematically explores various architectural frameworks, evaluates comparative advantages, identifies persistent challenges, and outlines future research directions essential for advancing intelligent, real-time production systems.

Methodology

To ensure a comprehensive and objective examination of the research landscape surrounding the integration of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) with Digital Twins (DT) for dynamic scheduling in discrete manufacturing, a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology was employed. This approach was chosen to rigorously collect, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies while minimizing bias and maximizing transparency and reproducibility (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

The literature search was conducted across four major academic databases recognized for their extensive coverage of engineering, computer science, and manufacturing research: IEEE Xplore, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Web of Science. These databases were selected to ensure broad disciplinary coverage and access to high-quality, peer-reviewed articles. The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including terms such as "Digital Twin," "Multi-Agent System," "dynamic scheduling," "real-time scheduling," "cyber-physical systems," "smart manufacturing," and "discrete manufacturing systems."

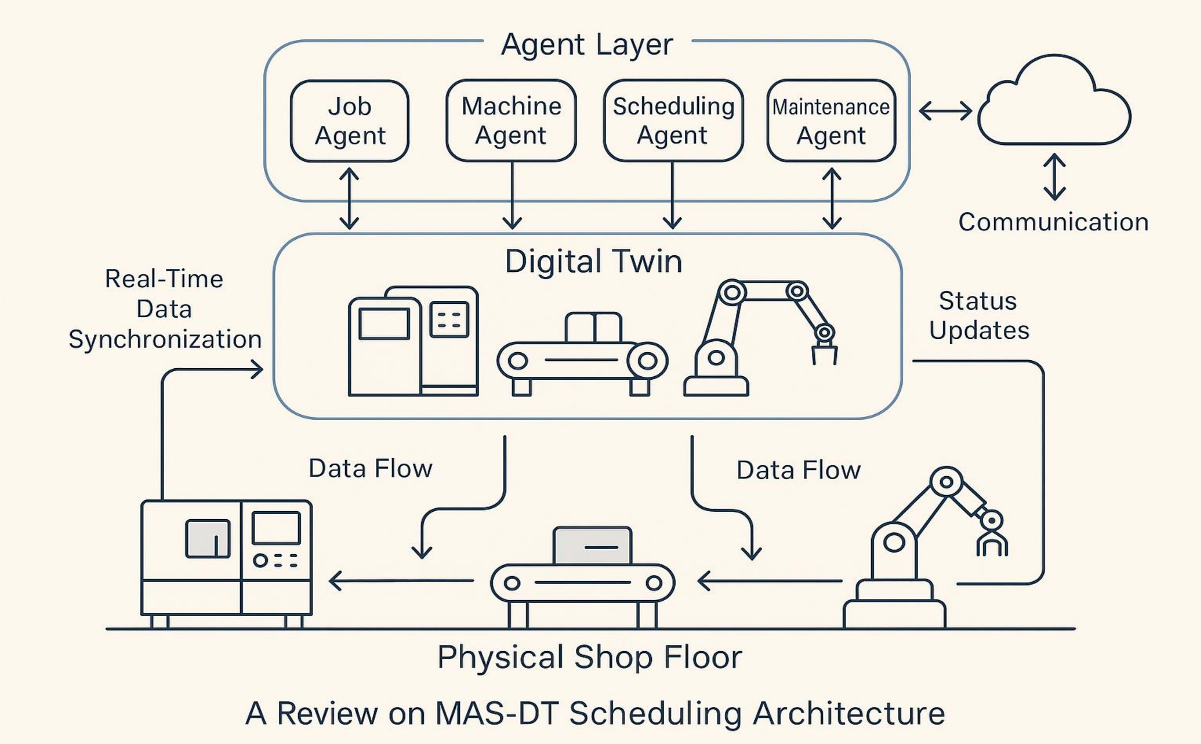
The inclusion criteria for article selection were carefully formulated to maintain relevance and focus. Studies were considered eligible if they (1) addressed the application of MAS and/or DT in dynamic or real-time scheduling contexts, (2) focused specifically on discrete manufacturing environments rather than continuous process industries, (3) were published in English between January 2016 and March 2024, and (4) presented empirical validation, simulation experiments, or substantial conceptual frameworks. Reviews, conceptual papers without technical depth, and studies not directly addressing scheduling or manufacturing were excluded.

Initially, 143 articles were identified through database searches. After a two-stage screening process-first by reviewing titles and abstracts, and second through full-text assessments-73 studies were selected for in-depth analysis. The selected papers were evaluated based on their methodological rigor, the clarity of MAS and DT integration, the scope and relevance of their scheduling models, and the degree of empirical validation provided (e.g., case studies, real-world deployment, or simulation).

During data extraction, key information was systematically recorded, including the architecture type (centralized, federated, service-oriented), scheduling approach (auction-based, heuristic, machine learning-driven), identified challenges, and proposed solutions. This structured methodology enabled the development of a comprehensive synthesis and critical evaluation of the state of the art in MAS-DT-enabled dynamic scheduling, laying a robust foundation for the analyses presented in the subsequent sections.

Digital Twin and Multi-Agent Systems: Fundamental Concepts

Digital Twins create a real-time digital replica of manufacturing assets or processes, capturing data continuously through IoT sensors and edge computing frameworks (Kritzinger et al., 2018). They provide visualization, predictive analytics, and simulation capabilities essential for adaptive control. Multi-Agent Systems, on the other hand, consist of decentralized autonomous units (agents) capable of localized decision-making, negotiation, and collaboration without reliance on a single control point (Wooldridge, 2009; Leitão, 2009).



The fusion of these two paradigms enables smart manufacturing environments where decisions are dynamically optimized, continuously synchronized with reality, and autonomously executed.

Existing MAS-DT Scheduling Architectures: A Comparative Review

Table 1: Summarizes key studies illustrating how MAS and DTs have been integrated for dynamic scheduling.

Study	Architecture Type	Scheduling Approach	Key Contribution
Shao & Kibira (2018)	Centralized DT with decentralized agents	Auction-based negotiation	Enhanced real-time scheduling responsiveness
Pan et al. (2020)	Federated DTs coordinated by MAS	Rule-based dynamic scheduling	Improved scalability across multiple production units
Leng et al. (2019)	Service-oriented DT-MAS	Event-driven adaptive scheduling	Faster disruption handling in shop floors
Cimino et al. (2019)	Hybrid MAS-DT framework	Reinforcement learning for job assignment	Adaptive optimization of complex scheduling problems
Negri et al. (2017)	Service-based CPS with DT and MAS	Heuristic-driven resource negotiation	Increased system flexibility and adaptability
Jones et al. (2020)	Decentralized MAS-DT architecture	Behavior-based agent collaboration	Improved fault tolerance and decentralized control
Tao et al. (2018)	DT integrated with Intelligent Agents	Predictive scheduling via real-time data	Strengthened predictive maintenance-driven scheduling
Monostori (2014)	Intelligent agent-based cyber-physical system	Autonomous rescheduling under uncertainties	Foundation for intelligent self-adaptive manufacturing
Wang et al. (2021)	Multi-level agent hierarchy with DT	Genetic algorithm-based scheduling	Reduced production lead times through self-organizing agents
Silva et al. (2023)	Distributed MAS coordinated DT network	Blockchain-enhanced secure scheduling	Improved trust and security in distributed scheduling environments

These studies indicate that no single architecture fits all scenarios; the choice depends on production scale, real-time demands, and interoperability requirements.

Key Factors Influencing MAS-DT Integration for Scheduling

The integration of Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) with Digital Twin (DT) technologies for dynamic scheduling in discrete manufacturing environments is a complex endeavor influenced by a variety of technical, organizational, and systemic factors. The success of this integration is not solely dependent on technological capability but also on how effectively multiple subsystems-both physical and virtual-collaborate in real time to achieve scheduling efficiency, system resilience, and production agility (Tao et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020). Below are five critical factors that significantly shape the effectiveness and scalability of MAS-DT integration in manufacturing systems.

Interoperability and Data Standardization

Interoperability stands as a foundational pillar for MAS-DT integration, as it ensures seamless data exchange and command execution between disparate subsystems-ranging from physical machines and sensors to virtual agents and DT models (Fuller et al., 2020; Negri et al., 2017). In a typical discrete manufacturing environment, components originate from various vendors, each employing unique communication protocols and data formats, leading to significant integration challenges (Kritzinger et al., 2018). Without a standardized interface or shared ontology, components often experience latency, data loss, or conflicting interpretations. The adoption of open communication standards such as OPC UA, AutomationML, and semantic data modeling is critical (Qi & Tao, 2018). These standards enable context-rich interoperability, allowing intelligent agents to process, exchange, and act upon shared data meaningfully across distributed DT-MAS environments.

Real-Time Communication Infrastructure

The success of dynamic scheduling hinges on the system's ability to achieve real-time communication between all entities. Delays in agent-to-agent or agent-to-DT communication can significantly undermine the accuracy of scheduling decisions (Pan et al., 2020). Efficient and reliable communication requires high-bandwidth, low-latency infrastructures. Industrial 5G networks, supported by time-sensitive networking (TSN) protocols, are increasingly recognized as critical enablers for real-time manufacturing ecosystems (Lu, 2017; Mourtzis et al., 2022). Furthermore, the application of edge computing, where computation is performed closer to the source of data generation, helps mitigate network congestion and ensures faster response times for real-time scheduling (Tao et al., 2018). Thus, a hybrid edge-cloud communication architecture is emerging as a best practice in recent MAS-DT integration efforts.

Intelligent Autonomous Agents

For MAS-DT systems to function effectively, agents must possess not only autonomy but also embedded intelligence capable of dynamic learning and decision optimization. Simple rule-based agents often fail to adapt to complex and volatile manufacturing scenarios (Leitão, 2009; Monostori, 2014). Intelligent agents enhanced with artificial intelligence (AI) techniques-such as reinforcement learning (Cimino et al., 2019), deep neural networks, and fuzzy logic systems-can dynamically adapt their behaviors based on the manufacturing environment's state and evolving operational goals. These agents can negotiate task assignments, adjust to unexpected machine breakdowns, and optimize scheduling policies in real time, based on feedback received from the Digital Twin models (Shao & Kibira, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). As a result, manufacturing systems become not just reactive but predictive and proactive in managing production flows.

Scalability and Flexibility

Scalability and flexibility are non-negotiable requirements for modern discrete manufacturing operations, particularly under the pressure of mass customization and highly variable product demands (Mourtzis, 2020). MAS-DT integration must support the seamless addition of new agents, machines, or operational units without deteriorating system performance (Tao et al., 2019). Distributed MAS architectures, where local agents interact autonomously without relying on a centralized decision point, are inherently more scalable and resilient than traditional centralized systems (Pan et al., 2020). Additionally, flexible MAS-DT frameworks support rapid reconfiguration, allowing agents and Digital Twins to reorganize dynamically in response to production disturbances, order variations, or capacity changes. Research has shown that federated DT architectures coordinated by intelligent MAS can significantly improve scalability while preserving system responsiveness and stability (Leng et al., 2019).

Trust Management and Security

As MAS-DT ecosystems become increasingly decentralized and interconnected, trust management and cybersecurity are paramount. Without robust trust frameworks, agent-based scheduling systems risk vulnerabilities such as false reporting, malicious behavior, or data tampering (Rasheed et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2023). Trust in MAS-DT systems spans authentication of agent identities, validation of decision integrity, and secure communication protocols. Blockchain technology has emerged as a promising solution to enhance trust in distributed manufacturing environments by providing immutable, decentralized ledgers for agent transactions (Silva et al., 2023). In parallel, cybersecurity measures such as encryption, intrusion detection systems (IDS), and anomaly detection algorithms must be integrated into the communication infrastructure to protect sensitive production and scheduling data (Leng et al., 2022). Without addressing these security challenges proactively, MAS-DT integration remains vulnerable to operational risks that could compromise system reliability and organizational competitiveness.

Comparison of MAS-DT Enabled Scheduling Models

Given the diverse architectural options available for integrating Multi-Agent Systems (MAS) with Digital Twins (DT) in manufacturing scheduling, it is crucial to understand the advantages and limitations of each model. Various frameworks have been proposed in recent literature, each emphasizing different operational priorities such as scalability, responsiveness, fault tolerance, and ease of deployment. Understanding these comparative dimensions allows researchers and practitioners to select the most appropriate architecture based on their specific production contexts, system scale, and organizational goals.

Table 2 provides a deeper comparative evaluation of the three main MAS-DT scheduling models frequently discussed in contemporary research: the Centralized DT Model, the Federated DT Model, and the Service-Oriented DT Model.

Table 2: Deeper Comparative Evaluation

Feature	Centralized DT Model	Federated DT Model	Service-Oriented DT Model
Scalability	Moderate	High	High
Real-Time Responsiveness	High	Moderate	High
Deployment Complexity	Low	High	Medium
Fault Tolerance	Moderate	High	High
Examples	Shao & Kibira (2018)	Pan et al. (2020)	Leng et al. (2019)

The Centralized DT Model offers simplicity and high real-time responsiveness by maintaining a single, unified Digital Twin instance that all agents interact with. However, it struggles with scalability and fault tolerance as the system grows more complex. In contrast, the Federated DT Model distributes multiple Digital Twins across the production environment, coordinated by decentralized agents. This architecture is more scalable and fault-tolerant, making it suitable for large-scale smart factories but at the expense of increased deployment and management complexity (Pan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the Service-Oriented DT Model utilizes service-based architecture principles, where Digital Twin functionalities are modularized and accessed by agents on demand, offering a balance between scalability, fault tolerance, and moderate complexity (Leng et al., 2019). Each model thus addresses different industrial priorities, and their selection should align with specific production system needs and resource constraints.

Challenges and Research Gaps

Despite the significant advancements achieved through the integration of Multi-Agent Systems and Digital Twins in dynamic scheduling, several persistent challenges continue to inhibit widespread industrial adoption. These challenges arise from technical, infrastructural, and organizational limitations inherent in complex cyber-physical production systems. Identifying and understanding these barriers is critical for guiding future research and innovation towards building more robust, scalable, and practical MAS-DT solutions.

Table 3 summarizes some of the most commonly reported challenges along with their corresponding impacts on system performance and adoption feasibility.

Table 3: Summary of Challenges vs. Solutions in MAS-DT Integration for Dynamic Scheduling

Challenge	Description	Impact
Lack of Unified Standards	No common data models or communication standards	Hinders cross-vendor system integration
High Computational Costs	Real-time simulation and negotiation overhead	Limits scalability
Security Vulnerabilities	Increased attack surfaces with agent autonomy	Threatens data integrity
Limited Industrial Case Studies	Most research is simulation-based	Reduces confidence for adoption

Future Research Directions

To fully exploit MAS-DT synergies for real-time dynamic scheduling, future work should focus on:

- Developing unified reference architectures for MAS-DT integration
- Leveraging AI-driven autonomous learning agents for scheduling decisions
- Establishing cybersecurity protocols specific to MAS-DT communication layers
- Conducting longitudinal case studies across varied discrete manufacturing domains
- Exploring hybrid cloud-edge computing models to reduce computational loads

Conclusion

The integration of Multi-Agent Systems with Digital Twins represents a powerful strategy for achieving dynamic, autonomous, and intelligent scheduling in discrete manufacturing environments. By combining decentralized decision-making with real-time system synchronization, MAS-enabled DT architectures enable unprecedented levels of operational flexibility, responsiveness, and resilience.

While the current body of research provides strong theoretical foundations, future work must prioritize standardization, cybersecurity, and real-world implementation to bridge the gap between laboratory innovation and industrial practice. The convergence of MAS, DT, AI, and 5G technologies heralds a new era for smart manufacturing where dynamic, intelligent scheduling will become the norm rather than the exception.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this manuscript.

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