

Generating Alternative Interpretations of Machining Features

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One of the major difficulties in extracting machining features is the lack of a systematic methodology to generate alternative ways of manufacturing a machined part. Most of the early research in feature extraction and process planning has not considered this aspect, and has focused on the generation of a single interpretation. In this paper, we propose a feature-based approach to generating alternative interpretations of machining features from a feature-based design model. The proposed approach simplifies the generation of alternative machining feature models by using information on feature which is captured and maintained during feature-based modeling and machining feature extraction. A set of machining features is incrementally extracted during the feature-based design process of a machined part. A feature conversion process converts each design feature into a machining feature or a set of machining features by using information on the geometry and the feature. Using reorientation, reduction, and/or splitting operations, alternative models are generated from the sets of extracted machining features. During the execution of each operation, unpromising models are pruned by using criteria such as minimising the number of accessibility directions. The machining features and their precedence relationships are represented in a STEP-based machining feature graph for the purpose of data exchange.

Keywords: Alternative interpretation; Feature-based design; Feature extraction; STEP

1. Introduction

Recently, the concept of features for design and manufacturing applications has received much attention [1]. Features can be defined from different viewpoints. Design features are the shapes related to a part's function, its design intent, or the

model construction methodology, whereas machining features are the shapes associated with distinctive machining operations. For machining applications, a design model needs to be interpreted in terms of machining features. This process is called *feature recognition* or *feature extraction*. Depending on whether the input design model contains feature information or not, there are two major approaches to feature extraction:

1. The geometry-based approach.
2. The feature-based approach.

In the geometry-based approach, machining features are recognised directly from a geometric design model [2–13]. On the other hand, in the feature-based approach, they are converted from a feature-based design model [14–19].

A set of extracted machining features is often called a machining feature model or interpretation of a part. Usually, a part can be represented by more than one interpretation. These alternative interpretations correspond to different manufacturing ways to machine the part [11–13,20,21]. Sakurai and Chin [11] and Tseng and Joshi [12] proposed a cell-based decomposition approach to generating alternative models. The volume to be removed (delta volume) is decomposed into cells by extending and intersecting all of its surfaces or halfspaces. A subset of these cells is then combined into a machining feature. In this way, cell composition is repeated until all the cells of the delta volume are consumed. As a result of cell composition, the delta volume is completely decomposed into a set of machining features, which is taken as an interpretation. Alternative interpretations can be generated by changing the composition sequence of the cells. Gupta [20] and Gupta and Nau [21] viewed an interpretation as a feature cover of the delta volume. They computed alternative interpretations from an initial feature model by using the feature covering methodology. Han [13] proposed a procedure to compute a satisfactory interpretation and to generate alternative interpretations on request from a process planner. However, loss of design information and computational inefficiency have been major problems in generating alternative feature models.

In this paper, we propose a feature-based approach to generating alternative interpretations of machining features from a feature-based design model. The proposed approach simplifies the generation of alternative machining feature models by using information on a feature which is captured and maintained

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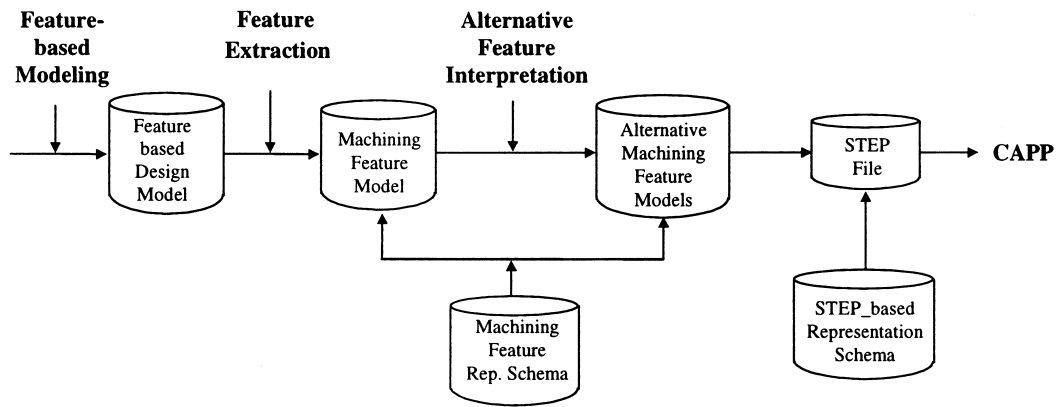


Fig. 1. A schematic diagram for generating alternative feature models.

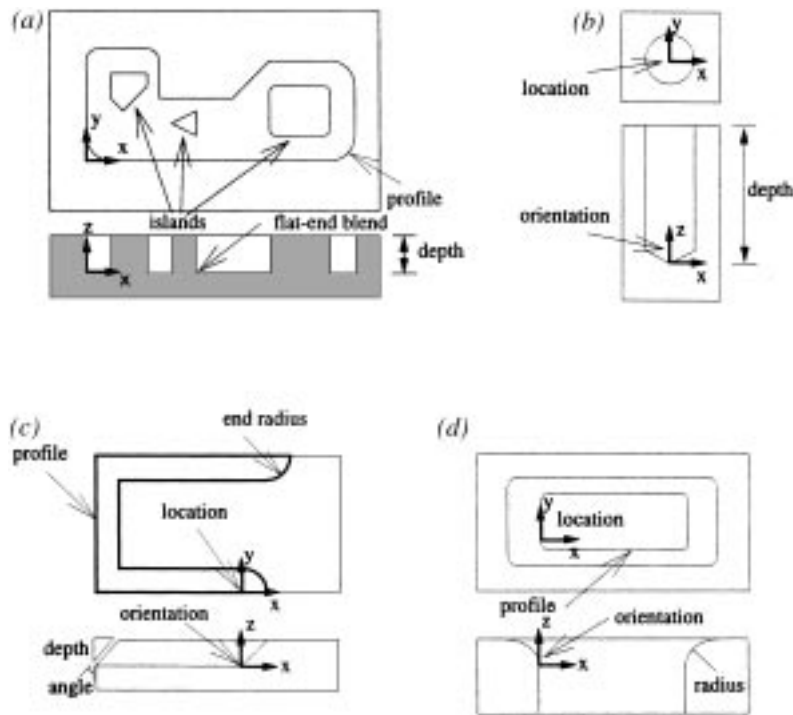


Fig. 2. Machining features: (a) pocket, (b) hole, (c) chamfer, and (d) round.

during feature-based modelling and machining feature extraction. A schematic diagram for generating alternative feature models is shown in Fig. 1. A set of machining features is incrementally extracted during the feature-based design process of a machined part. The feature conversion process converts each design feature into a machining feature or a set of machining features by using information on the geometry and feature. Using reorientation, reduction, and/or splitting operations, alternative models are generated from the sets of extracted machining features. During the execution of each operation, unpromising models are pruned by using criteria such as minimising the number of accessibility directions. The machining features and their precedence relationships are represented in a STEP-based machining feature graph for the purpose of data exchange.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes a feature representation scheme for machining features. Section 3 describes a method for generating alternative machining feature models. Section 4 illustrates implementation results. Section 5 presents a conclusion with some remarks.

2. Machining Feature Representation

2.1 Machining Features

Machining features considered in this paper are restricted to 3-axis milling operation features, similar to the MRSEVs [22,23]. The domain of machining features is confined to the subclasses of the linear swept features and edge-cut features

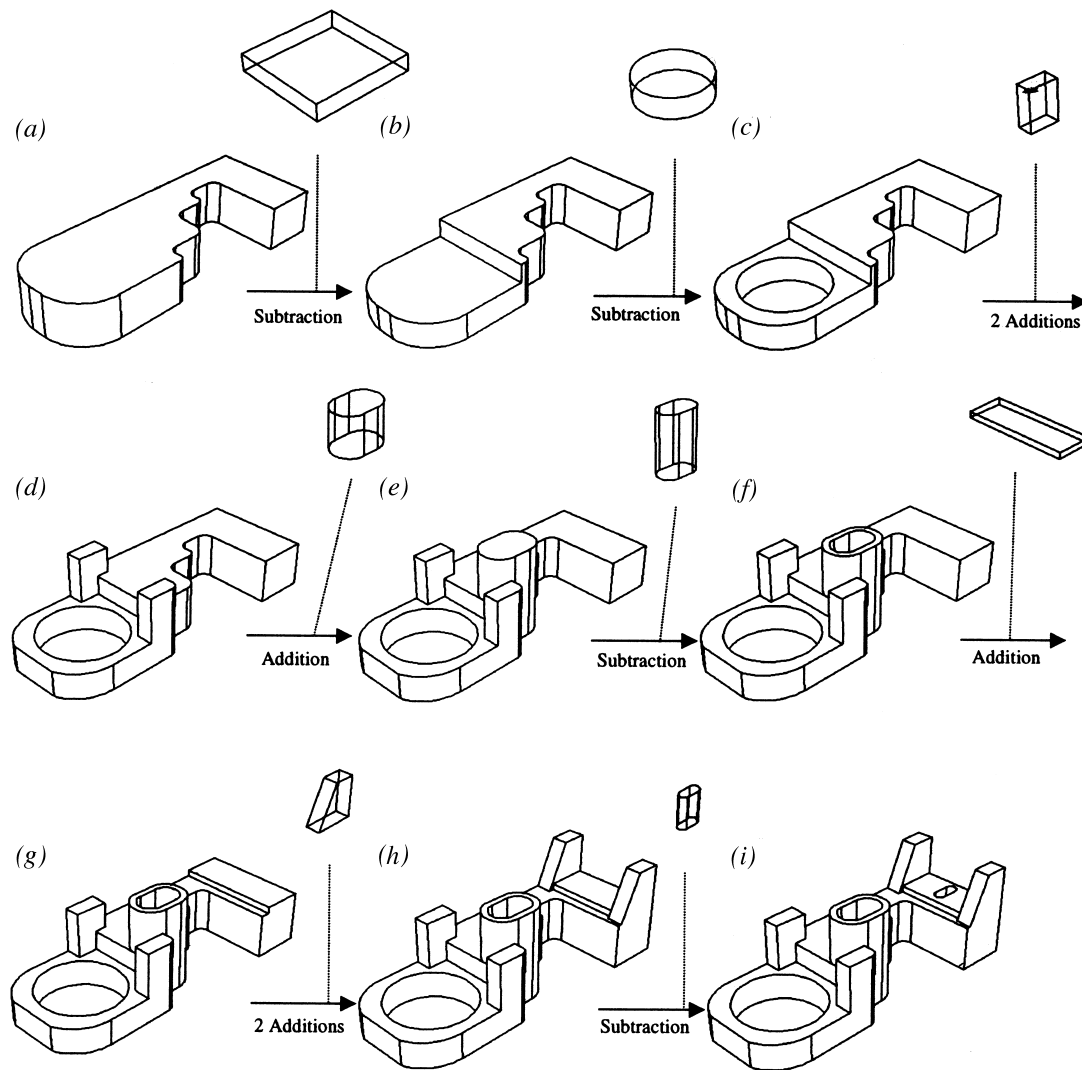


Fig. 5. Incremental feature-based modelling process.

called *activities* that references another *plan* set. Each element of the plan set references another process plan set, forming a recursive structure.

3. Generation of Alternative Machining Feature Models

3.1 An Initial Machining Feature Model

A set of machining features is extracted during modelling a part incrementally using design features [26]. Figure 5 shows a feature-based modelling process. Figure 6 shows a set of the machining features extracted to machine the part shown in Fig. 5(i). A machining feature model $M = \{M_1, M_2, \dots, M_n\}$ as well as feature precedence E can be represented in a *simple machining feature graph*, $S-MFG = \langle M, E \rangle$, that has the following properties:

1. There is no duplicated machining feature in M .

2. It has no pair of SPLIT-OR and JOIN-OR nodes.

A simple machining feature graph of the extracted machining features is constructed as follows:

1. Classify all the machining features that have the same approach direction into clusters C_i .
2. For each cluster C_i , create a pair of SPLIT-AND and JOIN-AND nodes and insert all the features in C_i into that pair.
3. Create a new pair of SPLIT-AND and JOIN-AND nodes and insert all the created pairs of C_i into the new pair.

3.2 Generating Alternative Feature Models

Alternative machining feature models are generated by applying reorientation, reduction and/or splitting operations to an extracted machining feature model M , as shown in Fig. 7.

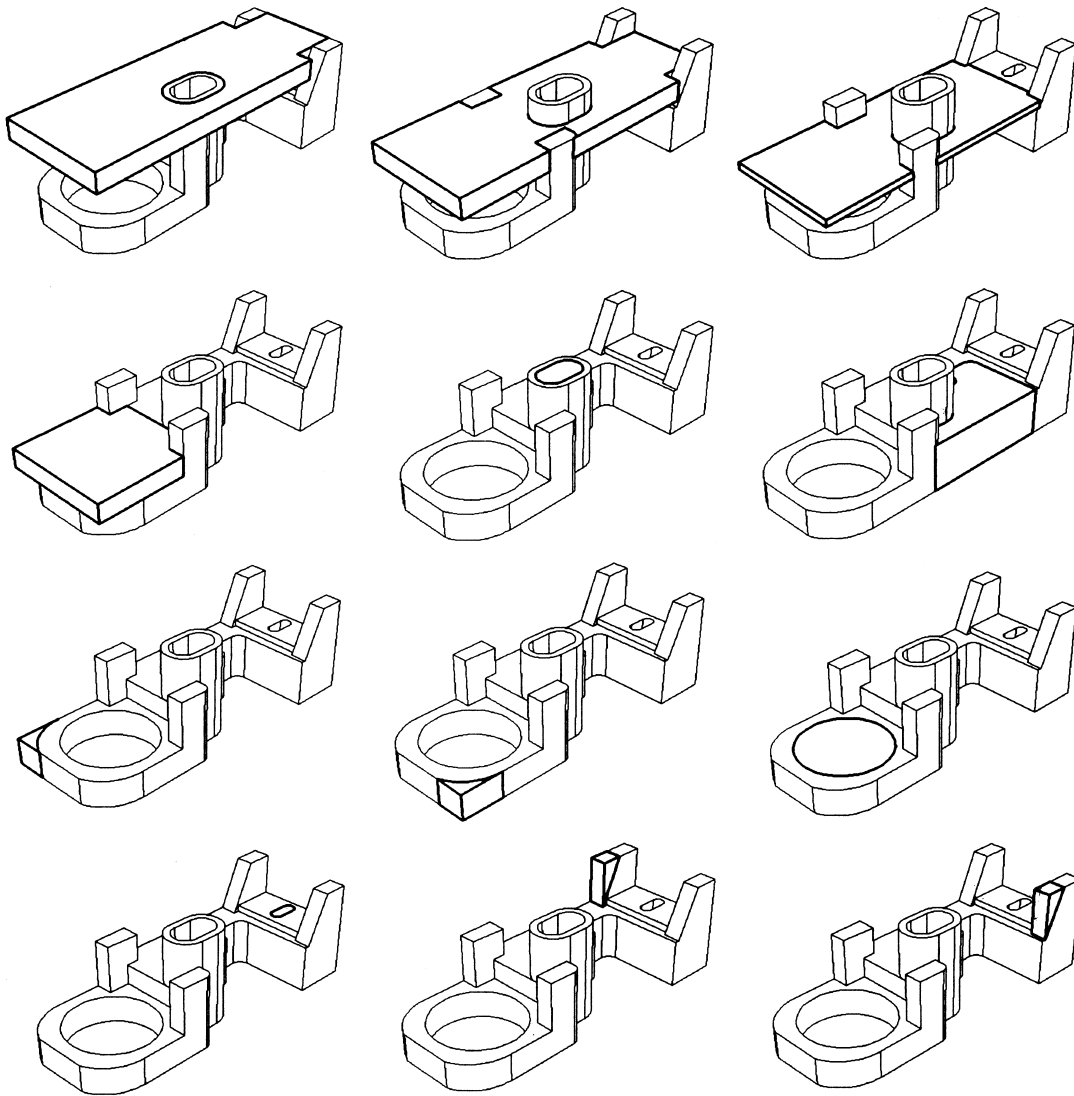


Fig. 6. Extracted machining features to machine the example part shown in Fig. 5.

3.2.1 Reorientation

For each feature M_i in the machining feature model M , the reorientation operation is performed to find a new feature M'_i that has the same feature type as M_i in a different approach direction. A machining feature can be machined along several feasible approach directions, which can be determined by extending the feature by an infinitesimal amount along a set of directions. If the extended volume does not intersect the part P , then it is accessible along that direction. For example, a through hole can be accessible in both axis directions. Since it is assumed that a machining feature is associated with only one approach direction, a feature with different approach directions is converted to several different features for each direction.

If such a feature M'_i exists as shown in Fig. 7(c), a new machining feature model $M' = M - \{M_i\} \cup \{M'_i\}$ is generated. Then, the manufacturability of the new model is analysed. The manufacturability depends on many factors, but one of the major factors is the number of set-ups. Reducing the number

of set-ups will not only reduce the time needed for machining, but also result in better machining tolerances. In this paper, only the number of set-ups is considered in the manufacturability analysis. If the number of set-ups in M' is larger than that in M , M' is discarded as an unpromising feature model as shown in Fig. 7(d). Otherwise, it is saved as M' (a new alternative model of M). The operation continues until all the features in M are evaluated. The following procedure describes the reorientation operation in detail.

PROCEDURE reorientation (M_i a set of M'_i)

INPUT: M_i

OUTPUT: a set of M'_i

1. Find a set of all M'_i such that
 - (a) the approach direction of M'_i is different from that of M_i .
 - (b) M'_i must be accessible such that $ext(M'_i) \cap^* P = \emptyset$ where $ext(M'_i)$ is the extended volume beyond M'_i along the approach direction of M'_i .

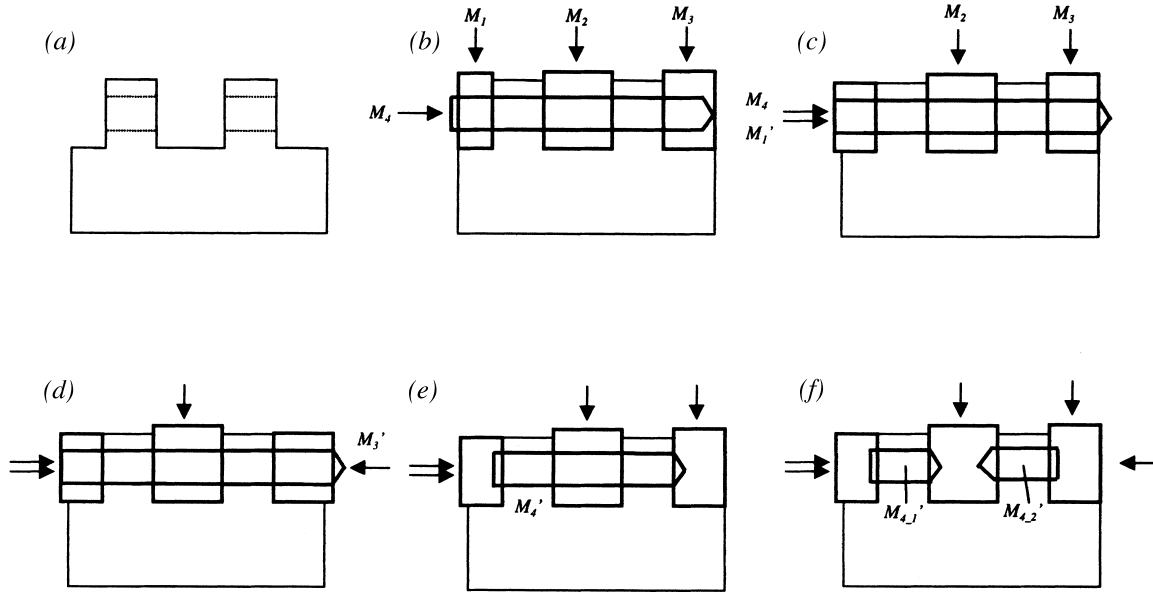


Fig. 7. Alternative generation operations: (a) a designed part, (b) an initial machining feature model, (c) M_1' is generated from M_1 reorientation, (d) an unpromising reorientation operation, (e) M_4' is generated from M_4 reduction by M_1' , and (f) $M_{4,1}'$ and $M_{4,2}'$ are generated from M_4' splitting by M_2 .

2. If no such M_i' exists, exit with a NULL set of M_i' .
3. Return a set of M_i' .

END_PROCEDURE

3.2.2 Reduction

When the reorientation operation ends, the reduction operation is applied to each machining feature model M^k in the set of alternative feature models, $A = \{M^1, M^2, \dots, M^n\}$. After finding each feature M_j in M^k , intersecting with the feature M_i , the reduction operation tries to find a feature M_i' by $M_i' = M_i -^* M_j$. If there exists such a feature, a new feature model $M^{k'} = M^k - M_i \cup [M_i']$ is generated as shown in Fig. 7(e). Details are described in the following procedure.

PROCEDURE reduction (M_i, M_j, M_i')

INPUT: M_i and M_j

OUTPUT: M_i'

1. If $M_i \cap^* M_j = \emptyset$ exit.
2. Find M_i' such that
 - (a) $erv(M_i') \subset erv(M_i)$ where $erv()$ is an effective removal volume.
 - (b) $erv(M_i') \cup^* P = \emptyset$
3. If no such M_i' exists, exit.
4. Return M_i' .

END—PROCEDURE

3.2.3 Splitting

Finally, the splitting operation is applied to the set of alternative models A . After finding each intersecting feature M_j in M^k , the

splitting operation is performed to split M_i into two features M_{i1}' and M_{i2}' where $\{M_{i1}', M_{i2}'\} = M_i -^* M_j$. If such features M_{i1}' and M_{i2}' exist, a new feature model $M^{k'} = M^k - \{M_i\} \cup \{M_{i1}', M_{i2}'\}$ is generated as shown in Fig. 7(f).

PROCEDURE split ($M_i, M_j, M_{i1}', M_{i2}'$)

INPUT: M_i and M_j

OUTPUT: M_{i1}', M_{i2}'

1. Find features M_{i1}' and M_{i2}' such that
 - (a) both $erv(M_{i1}')$ and $erv(M_{i2}')$ $\subset erv(M_i)$ where $erv()$ is an effective removal volume.
 - (b) $erv(M_{i1}') \cap^* P = \emptyset$ and $erv(M_{i2}') \cap^* P = \emptyset$
2. Return M_{i1}' , and M_{i2}'

END_PROCEDURE

3.3 Merging Machining Feature Graphs

Each alternative feature model M^i in A can be represented in a simple machining feature graph as explained earlier. Consequently, all the simple machining feature graphs $S\text{-MFGs}$ must be combined into a combined machining feature graph $C\text{-MFG}$ to represent all the alternative ways for machining a part. A $C\text{-MFG}$ can be defined as follows: $C\text{-MFG} = S\text{-MFG}_1 \oplus S\text{-MFG}_2 \cdots S\text{-MFG}_{n-1} \oplus S\text{-MFG}_n$ where \oplus is a merging operator. As shown in Fig. 8(a), a $C\text{-MFG}$ is constructed using the following two types of merging operations.

3.3.1 Merging two S-MFGs

The merging of two simple machining feature graphs $S\text{-MFG}_1$ and $S\text{-MFG}_2$ can be constructed as follows.

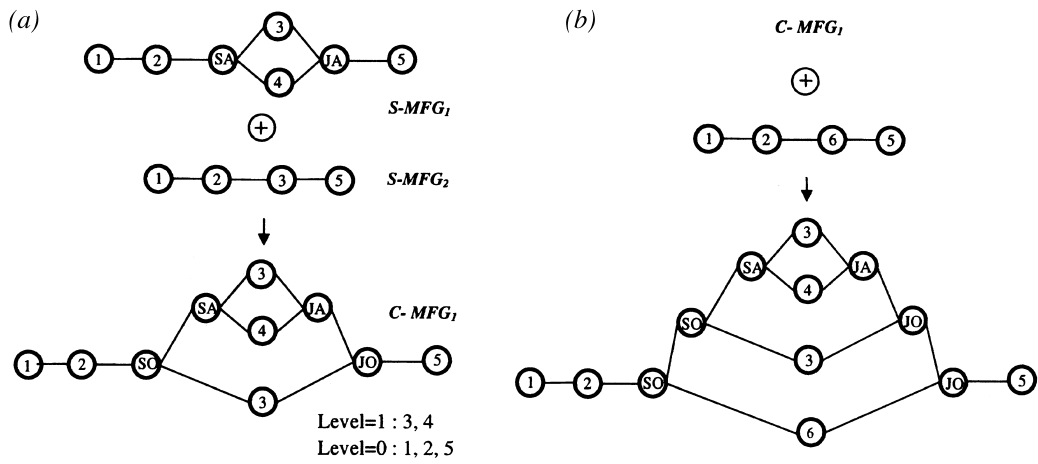


Fig. 8. Graph merging operations.

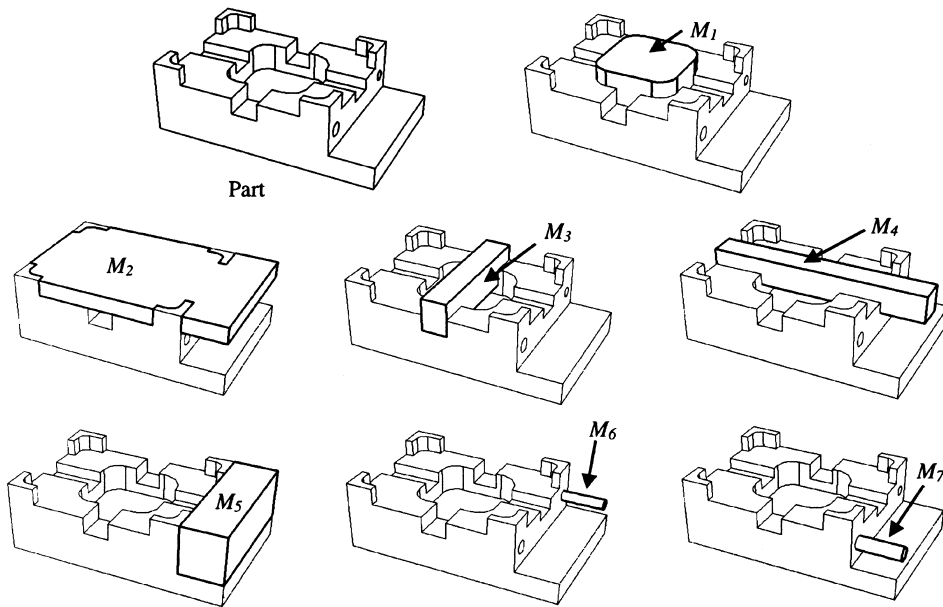


Fig. 9. A machining feature model of a designed part.

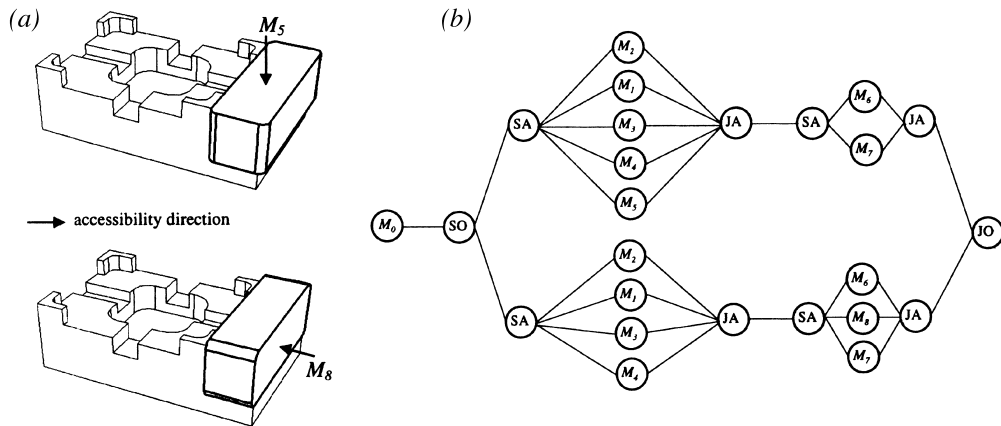


Fig. 10. Reorientation operation: (a) reorientation of a pocket and (b) a machining feature graph.

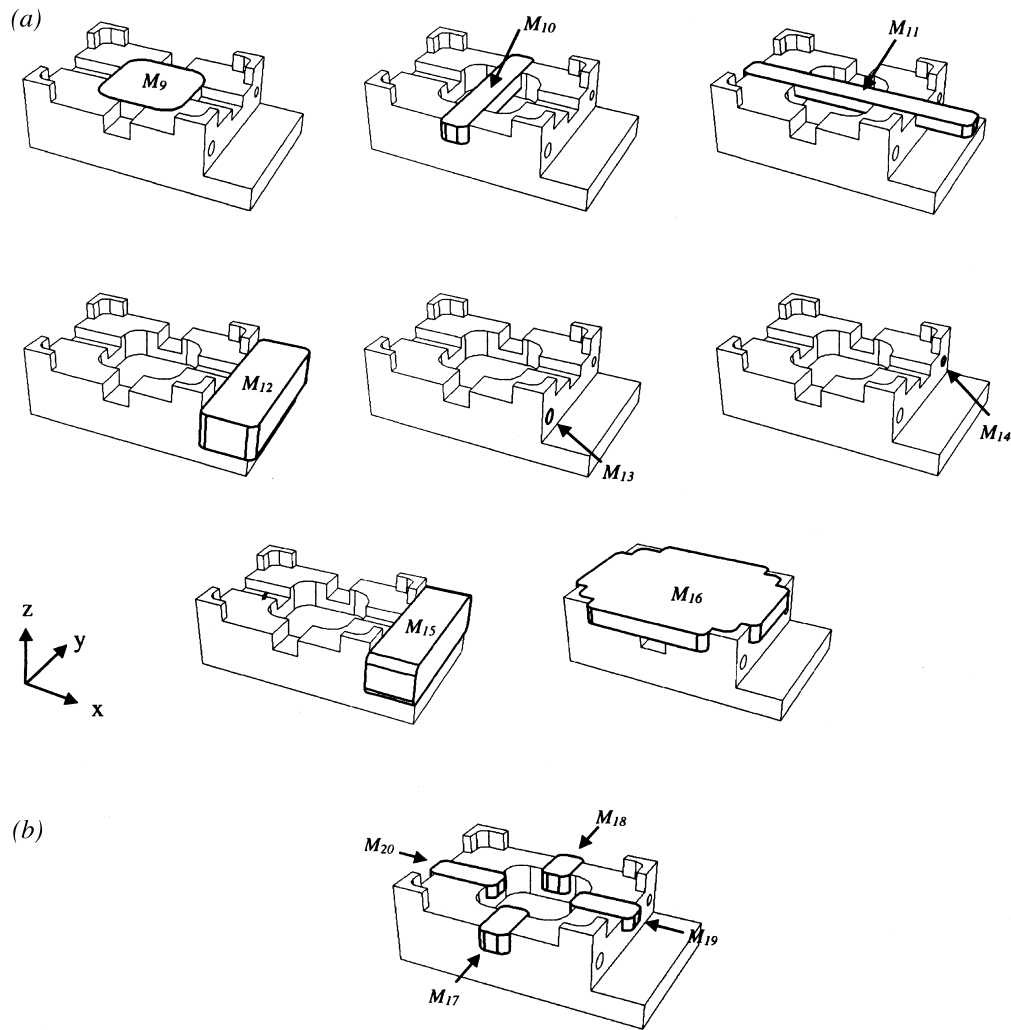


Fig. 11. Alternative interpretation: (a) reduction operation and (b) splitting operation.

1. Redefine a pair of SPLIT-AND and JOIN-AND nodes in each $S\text{-MFG}_i$ as a single node, so that each $S\text{-MFG}_i$ is sequentially ordered.
2. Find two nodes n_1 and n_2 such that n_1 and n_2 in both $S\text{-MFG}_1$ and $S\text{-MFG}_2$.
3. Merge $S\text{-MFG}_1$ and $S\text{-MFG}_2$ at both n_1 and n_2 nodes, and insert a SPLIT-OR node after n_1 and a JOIN-OR node before n_2 .
4. Repeat steps (2) and (3) for the remaining parts of the two graphs until no more merging operations can be carried out at the same level.
5. If merging between $S\text{-MFG}$ and $C\text{-MFG}$ fails, increment the level of nodes in $S\text{-MFG}$ by one and set $LEVEL = LEVEL + 1$. Then, repeat the above steps until no graph merging is necessary (see Fig. 8(b)).

3.3.2 Merging a C-MFG and a S-MFG

This operation takes similar steps as for the merging operation between two $S\text{-MFG}$ s. First, all the nodes in the $C\text{-MFG}$ are labelled with depth levels such that inner nodes between SPLIT-OR and JOIN-OR nodes have higher levels, as shown in Fig. 8(a). Initially, all the nodes in the $S\text{-MFG}$ have zero levels. A new $C\text{-MFG}$ can be constructed as follows.

1. Initially, $LEVEL$ is set to zero.

4. Implementation Results

The proposed approach has been implemented as a submodule of the feature-based parametric modelling system in [26]. This module has been written in C++ on an SGI Indigo2 workstation using ACIS as a solid modelling kernel.

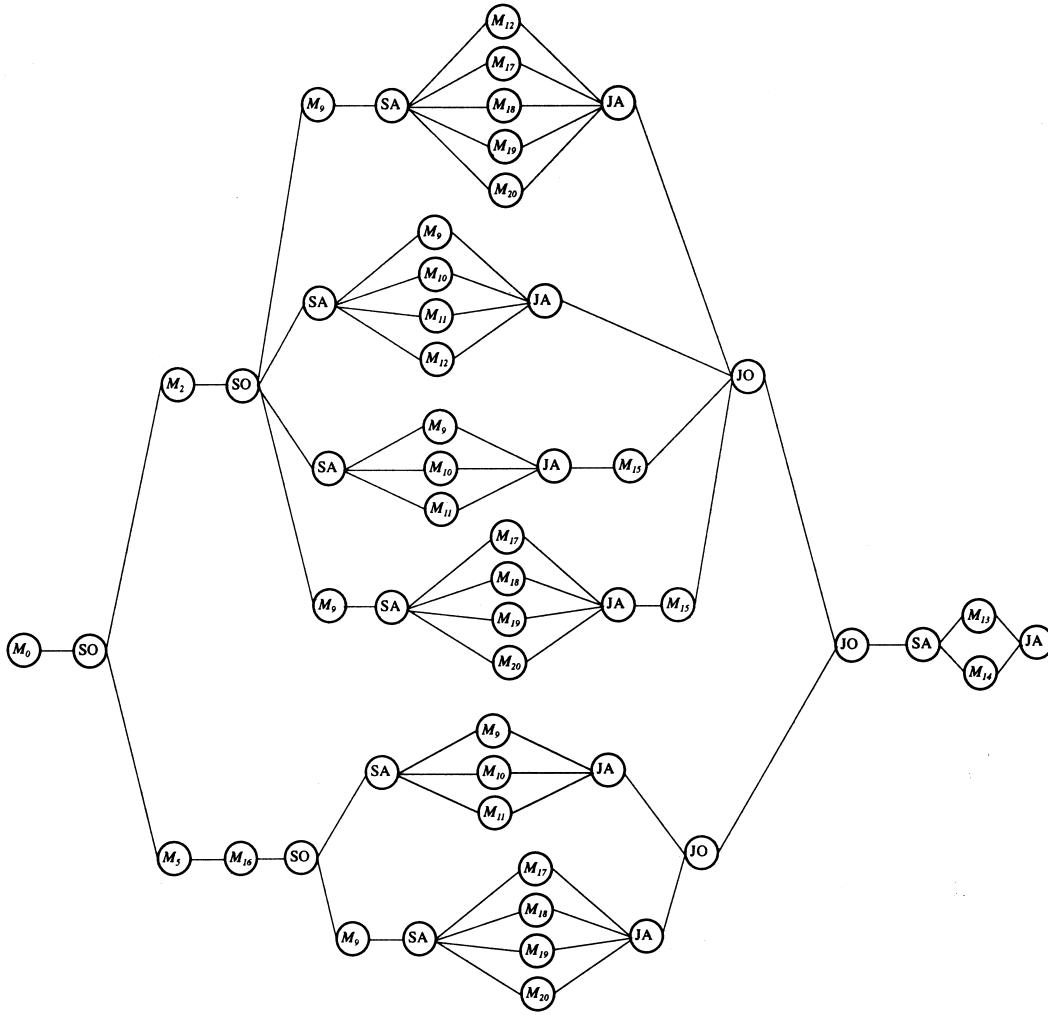


Fig. 12. A complete machining feature graph.

Figure 9 shows an initial machining feature model $M = \{M_1, M_2, \dots, M_7\}$ to machine a part modelled by a base, 6 depressions, and 4 protrusions. Note that each machining feature is defined as a *maximum* volume [11]. By reorientation, M_8 is generated from M_5 , as shown in Fig. 10. Thus, two alternative machining feature models M^1 and M^2 are generated, as shown in Fig. 10(b), where

$$\begin{aligned}
 A &= \{M^1, M^2\} \\
 M^1 &= \{M_1, M_2, M_3, M_4, M_5, M_6, M_7\} \\
 M^2 &= \{M_1, M_2, M_3, M_4, M_8, M_6, M_7\}.
 \end{aligned}$$

Since there are two approach directions, $[0 \ 0 \ 1]^T$ and $[1 \ 0 \ 0]^T$, either approach direction can be machined first. In this example, the set-up is ordered in the sequence of $+z$ and $+y$ approach directions for simplicity.

After reduction, the alternative model M^1 is modified into M^{1-1} and M^{1-2} , and M^2 into M^{2-1} where

$$\begin{aligned}
 M^{1-1} &= \{M_2, M_9, M_{10}, M_{11}, M_{12}, M_{13}, M_{14}\} \\
 M^{1-2} &= \{M_5, M_{16}, M_9, M_{10}, M_{11}, M_{13}, M_{14}\} \\
 M^{2-1} &= \{M_2, M_9, M_{10}, M_{11}, M_{15}, M_{13}, M_{14}\}
 \end{aligned}$$

In M^{1-1} , M_5 is reduced by M_2 into M_{12} and in M^{1-2} , M_2 is reduced by M_5 into M_{16} . As shown in Fig. 11, M_{10} is split into M_{17} and M_{18} by M_9 , and M_{11} split into M_{19} and M_{20} by M_6 after the splitting operation. Thus, three more alternative interpretations are generated as follows.

$$\begin{aligned}
 M^4 &= \{M_2, M_9, M_{12}, M_{17}, M_{18}, M_{19}, M_{20}, M_{13}, M_{14}\} \\
 M^5 &= \{M_2, M_9, M_{17}, M_{18}, M_{19}, M_{20}, M_{15}, M_{13}, M_{14}\} \\
 M^6 &= \{M_5, M_{16}, M_9, M_{17}, M_{18}, M_{19}, M_{20}, M_{13}, M_{14}\}
 \end{aligned}$$

A complete machining feature graph is shown in Fig. 12. The Appendix shows a STEP physical file of the machining feature graph shown in Fig. 12.

5. Conclusion

A feature-based approach has been presented for generating alternative interpretations of machining features. An initial machining feature model is extracted from a feature-based design model, and alternative models are generated from the initial feature model by applying the proposed alternative gener-

ation operators. Since the proposed approach uses information such as design features information, nominal geometry, and functional requirements, it can generate alternative models efficiently and fast. A STEP-based feature representation scheme is used for the efficient data transfer to CAPP systems. However, there are still several issues to be studied further:

1. It would be valuable to include more complex feature types (composite features or feature groups).
2. Design rules and constraints are not yet well integrated in the system.

A process planning system based on the proposed methodology should be developed.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix STEP Physical File

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#5400 = PLANE(('', #5300);
#5500 = POCKET_BOTTOM(('', .TRUE., ('', .TRUE., (#5400));
#5600 = CARTESIAN_POINT(('',(0.000000, 0.000000, 0.000000));
#5700 = DIRECTION(('',(0.000000, 0.000000, 1.000000));
#5800 = DIRECTION(('',(1.000000, 0.000000, 0.000000));
#5900 = AXIS_PLACEMENT_3D(('', #5600, #5700, #5800);
#1 = POCKET(('', .TRUE., #5900, #5000, #5500);
.
.
#50 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#12, #17, #18, #19, #20);
#51 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #10, #11, #12);
#52 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #10, #11);
#53 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#17, #18, #19, #20);
#54 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #10, #11);
#55 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#17, #18, #19, #20);
#56 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #50);
#57 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#52, #15);
#58 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #53, #15);
#59 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#9, #55);
#60 = MULTIPLE_CHOICE_ACTIVITY_SET(#56, #51, #57, #58);
#61 = MULTIPLE_CHOICE_ACTIVITY_SET(#54, #59);
#62 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#2, #60);
#63 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#5, #16, #61);
#64 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#62, #63);
#65 = SERIAL_UNORDERED_ACTIVITY_SET(#13, #14);
#66 = SEQUENTIAL_ACTIVITY_SET(#0, #64, #65);
ENDSEC;
END-ISO-10303-21;

```