FOUNDATION FOR INTELLIGENT PHYSICAL AGENTS

FIPA Brokering Interaction Protocol Specification

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Foreword

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1 FIPA Brokering Interaction Protocol

The FIPA Brokering Interaction Protocol (IP) is designed to support brokerage interactions in mediated systems and in multi-agent systems, for example, [Finin97].

Generally speaking, a broker is an agent that offers a set of communication facilitation services to other agents using some knowledge about the requirements and capabilities of those agents. A typical example of brokering is one in which an agent can request a broker to find one or more agents who can answer a query. The broker then determines a set of appropriate agents to which to forward the query, sends the query to those agents and relays their answers back to the original requestor. The use of brokerage agents can significantly simplify the task of interaction with agents in a multi-agent system. Additionally, brokering agents also enable a system to be adaptable and robust in dynamic situations, supporting scalability and security control at the brokering agent.

The representation of this IP is given in *Figure 1* which is based on an extension of UML 1.x. [Odell2001]. This protocol is identified by the token `fipa-brokering` as the value of the `protocol` parameter of the ACL message.

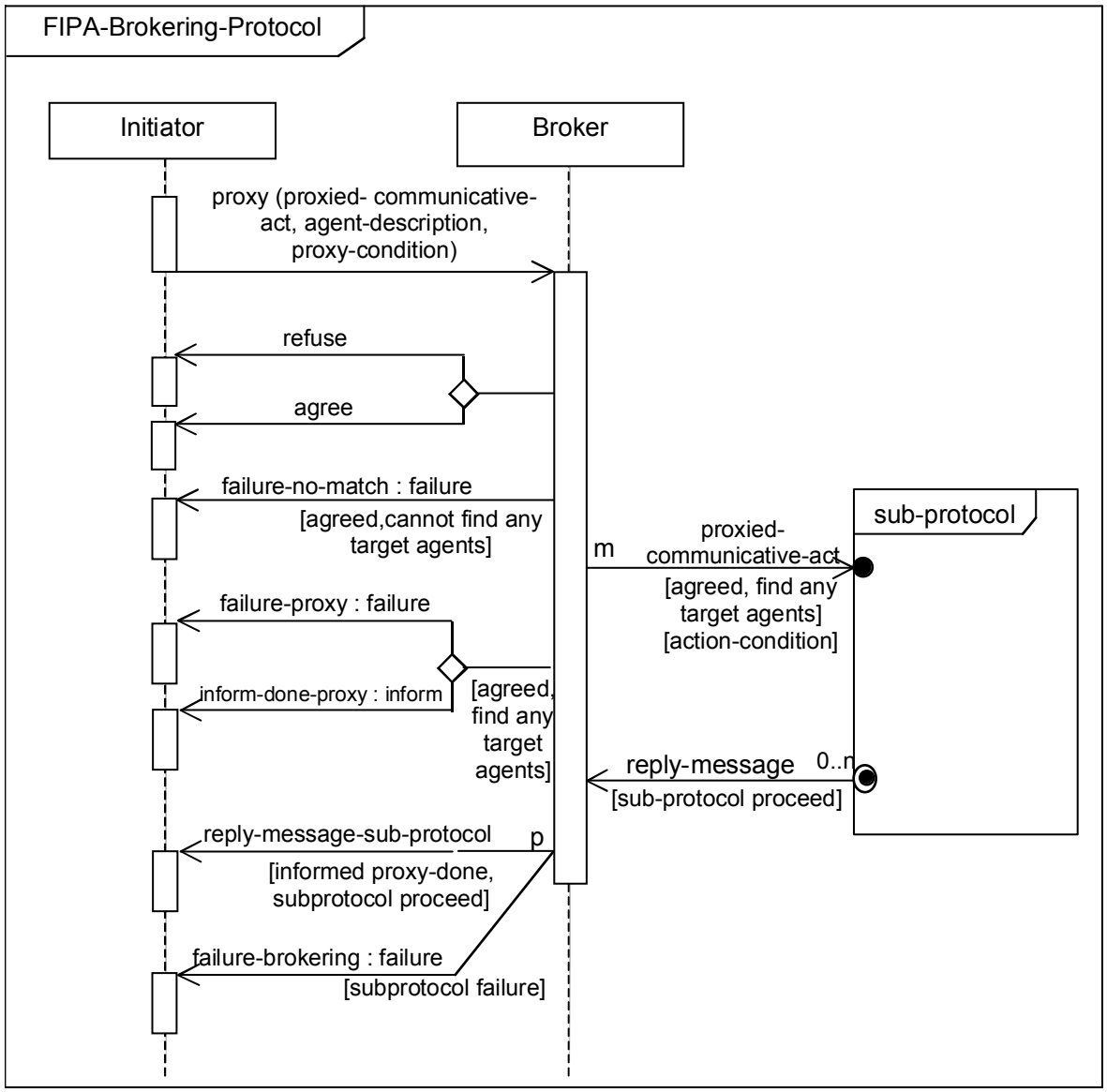

Figure 1: FIPA Brokering Interaction Protocol

1.1 Explanation of the Interaction Protocol Flow

The FIPA Brokering Interaction Protocol (IP) is a macro IP since the `proxy` communicative act (see [FIPA00037]) for brokerage embeds a communicative act as its argument and so the IP for the embedded communicative act is also embedded in this IP. This embedded IP guides some parts of the remainder of the interaction, thus parts of this protocol are written very generically.

The Initiator of the brokering interaction begins the interaction with a `proxy` message which contains the following: a referential expression denoting the target agents to which the broker should forward the communicative act, the communicative act to forward and a set of proxy conditions such as the maximum number of agents to which the message should be forwarded. The Broker processes the request and makes a decision whether to agree to or refuse the request and communicates either an `agree` or a `refuse` communicative act accordingly. Communication of a `refuse` terminates the interaction.

Once the Broker has agreed to be a proxy, it then locates agents per the description from the `proxy` message. If no such agents can be found, the Broker returns a `failure-no-match` and the interaction terminates. Otherwise, the Broker may modify the list of matching agents based on the `proxy-condition` parameter. It then begins *m* interactions with the resulting list of *n* agents with each interaction in its own separate sub-protocol. At this point, the Broker should record some of the ACL parameters (see [FIPA00061]), for example, `conversation-id, reply-with` and `sender`, of the received `proxy` message to return in the *r* replies to the Initiator.

Note that the nature of the sub-protocol and the nature of the replies are driven by the interaction protocols specified in the communicative act from the `proxy` message. As the sub-protocol progresses, the Broker forwards the responses that it receives from the sub-protocol to the Initiator. These messages are defined as the `reply-message-sub-protocol` communications, and may be either successful replies as defined by the sub-protocol or `failure`. If the initial proxy was an `inform`, there may in fact be no replies from the sub-protocol (and in fact means that the interaction is identical to a recruited `inform`). When the sub-protocol completes, the Broker forwards the final `reply-message` from the sub-protocol and the brokering IP terminates. However, there can be other failures that are not explicitly returned from the sub-protocol, for example, the agent that is executing the sub-protocol has failed. If the Broker detects such problems, it returns a `failure-brokering`, which terminates the IP.

A second issue to address occurs because multiple agents may match and therefore multiple sub-protocols (*m* of them) may be initiated by the Broker within the brokering IP. In this case, the Broker may collect the *n* received responses and combine them into a single `reply-message-sub-protocol`, or may forward the `reply-message-sub-protocol` messages from the separate sub-protocols individually (*1 p n.*). This is complicated by situations such as one agent responding with a `failure` while a second agent returns a `reply-message`, or the situation where results are inconsistent. The Broker must determine whether to resolve such situations internally or forward the responses to the Initiator. In doing this, the Broker must also be careful to avoid disruptive acts such as directly forwarding a `failure` from a sub-protocol, which would have the inadvertent effect of ending the brokering IP.

Any interaction using this interaction protocol is identified by a globally unique, non-null `conversation-id` parameter, assigned by the Initiator. The agents involved in the interaction must tag all of its ACL messages with this conversation identifier. This enables each agent to manage its communication strategies and activities, for example, it allows an agent to identify individual conversations and to reason across historical records of conversations.

In the case of 1:N interaction protocols or sub-protocols the Initiator is free to decide if the same `conversation-id` parameter should be used or a new one should be issued. Additionally, the messages may specify other interaction-related information such as a timeout in the `reply-by` parameter that denotes the latest time by which the sending agent would like to have received the next message in the protocol flow.

1.2 Exceptions to Interaction Protocol Flow

At *any* point in the IP, the receiver of a communication can inform the sender that it did not understand what was communicated. This is accomplished by returning a `not-understood` message. As such, *Figure 1* does not depict a `not-understood` communication as it can occur at any point in the IP. The communication of a `not-understood` within an interaction protocol may terminate the entire IP and termination of the interaction may imply that any

commitments made during the interaction are null and void. However, since this IP broadcasts to more than one Participant, multiple responses are also possible. Each response, then, must be evaluated separately – and some of these responses might be `not-understood`. However, terminating the entire IP in this case might not be appropriate, as other Participants may be continuing with their sub-protocols.

At any point in the IP, the initiator of the IP may cancel the interaction protocol by initiating the meta-protocol shown in *Figure 2*. The `conversation-id` parameter of the cancel interaction is identical to the `conversation-id` parameter of the interaction that the Initiator intends to cancel. The semantics of cancel should roughly be interpreted as meaning that the initiator is no longer interested in continuing the interaction and that it should be terminated in a manner acceptable to both the Initiator and the Participant. The Participant either informs the Initiator that the interaction is done using an `inform-done` or indicates the failure of the cancellation using a `failure`.

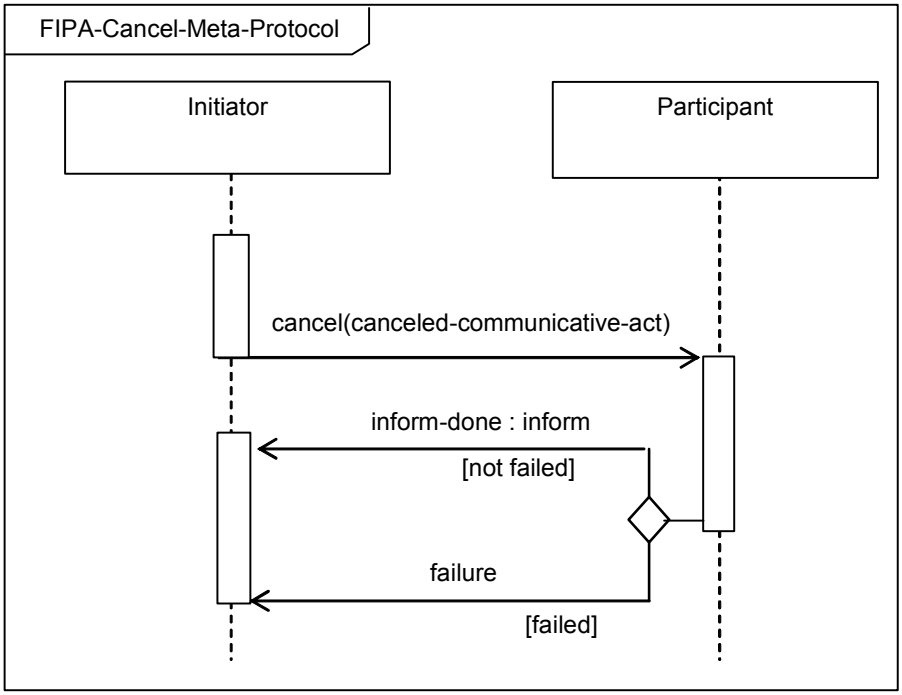

Figure 2: FIPA Cancel Meta-Protocol

This IP is a pattern for a simple interaction type. Elaboration on this pattern will almost certainly be necessary in order to specify all cases that might occur in an actual agent interaction. Real world issues such as the effects of cancelling actions, asynchrony, abnormal or unexpected IP termination, nested IPs, and the like, are explicitly not addressed here.

2 References

[Finin97] Finin, T. Labrou, Y. and Mayfield, J., *KQML as an Agent Communication Language*. In: Software Agents, Bradshaw, J., Ed., MIT Press, 1997.

[FIPA00037] FIPA Communicative Act Library Specification. Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents, 2000. http://www.fipa.org/specs/fipa00037/

[FIPA00061] FIPA ACL Message Structure Specification. Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents, 2000. http://www.fipa.org/specs/fipa00061/

[Odell2001] Odell, James, Van Dyke Parunak, H. and Bauer, B., *Representing Agent Interaction Protocols in UML*. In: Agent-Oriented Software Engineering, Ciancarini, P. and Wooldridge, M., Eds., Springer, pp. 121-140, Berlin, 2001. http://www.fipa.org/docs/input/f-in-00077/

3 Informative Annex A — ChangeLog

3.1 2002/11/01 - version G by TC X2S

Page 1, line 42: Reworked and expanded the section description of the IP

Page 2, Figure 1: The `not-understood` communication was removed

Page 2, Figure 1: Used a more generic set of communicative acts which the Broker is going to forward the responses it received from the sub-protocol and if the Broker notices some failure, such as no response at all from the sub-protocol after a given time period, then the Broker may send the Initiator a failure of its own

Page 2, Figure 1: Multiple sub-protocols indicated by inserting *m*, *n* and *p* respectively on three arcs; *m* sub-protocols can be started, resulting in *n* responses that the Broker can consolidate into *p* responses to the Initiator

Page 2, Figure 1: To conform to UML 2, the protocol name was placed in a boundary, x is removed from the diamonds (xor is now the default) and the template box was removed

Page 2, line 70: Added a new section on Explanation of Protocol Flow

Page 2, line 70: Reworked and expanded the section on Exceptions of Protocol Flow to incorporate a meta-protocol for cancel

Page 2, line 70: Added a paragraph explaining the `not-understood` communication and its relationship with the IP

3.2 2002/12/03 - version H by FIPA Architecture Board

Entire document: Promoted to Standard status