

# Collecting structured logs of instances as process nets in Petriflow language

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we present a prototype of a module of the Petriflow application engine that stores process nets for each single case of a Petriflow model, whose underlying process model is a place/transitions net. It enables to filter cases according to search queries and to export the process runs for the filtered cases within a compressed form, containing the each process net in a separate file. The process nets can be used for further analysis or as an input of process mining methods. Each process net can be opened in the application builder and simulated. As parameters in the search, we chose fact transitions that are used to identify the set of markings of the instance of the business model.

**Keywords:** Petriflow · Process-driven programming · Petri nets · Process nets

## 1 Introduction

Using place/transition Petri nets [1] one can model simple processes in short time with only basic knowledge of the modeling language. However, in order to model all aspects necessary to implement a real application that should be deployed, the place/transition Petri nets need to be extended in an appropriate way, such as for example Coloured Petri Nets [2]. Although there are several tools for modelling and analysis of different variants of Petri nets, including Colour Petri Nets, such as CPN Tools [3], most of them are developed with the purpose to serve to academic community, but up to our knowledge they do not offer a process engine used in industrial applications to run instances of processes modelled by Petri nets. For that purpose, recently a language for process driven application development based on extension of place/transition Petri nets, called Petriflow [4], was defined and the appropriate application builder and application engine were developed. It uses the basic structure of place/transition Petri Nets, but it already has its own extensions that are designed for better modelling development. Nowadays, the Petriflow processes are deployed in the

dozens of application engine installations, running more than 100 millions of instances (cases) of Petriflow processes. Although the commercial version of the application engine collects logs of the running cases in a sequential log, it is not straightforward to use this log for analysis of for process mining, as it contains only partially structured text. However, because process layer of Petriflow models is formed by place/transition nets, extended possibly with inhibitor arcs [5], read arcs [6], reset arcs [6] and self-modifying arcs [7], one could store the information about history of single cases in form of process nets [8] or runs. For formal definitions of place/transition Petri nets and their process nets we refer to [8]. In this paper we will use the term runs to denote process nets, although in literature runs often describe labeled partial orders obtained from process nets by forgetting conditions [8]. Furthermore, we present a prototype of a module of the Petriflow application engine that stores process nets for each single case of a Petriflow model, whose underlying process model is a place/transitions net. It enables to filter cases according to search queries and to export the process runs for the filtered cases within a compressed form, containing the each process net in a separate file. The process nets can be used for further analysis or as an input of process mining methods. Each process net can be opened in the application builder and simulated. As parameters in the search, we chose fact transitions that are used to identify the set of markings of the instance of the business model [9].

## 2 Petriflow and PDP

Netgrif application engine, a part of the Netgrif platform, is built to interpret programs of the language Petriflow. Petriflow is a high level programming language for process driven application development. Petriflow follows the programming paradigm called process-driven programming (PDP). A comparison of Petriflow's concept with other well-known programming paradigms is essential to understand the meaning of the PDP paradigm. In this section we discuss how process-driven programming extends and combines advantages of object-oriented programming (OOP), business process modelling (BPM), event-driven programming (EDP) and relational databases (RDB).

While binding methods with the data in classes was one of the main features of OOP that helped to create more modular programs, PDP adds processes to classes to describe a life-cycle of objects of a class. In this way, by adding processes that define when methods of a class can be called and who can call these methods, applications can be programmed easier, faster and therefore cheaper.

Main building blocks of object oriented programs are classes and their objects. In comparison, main building blocks of process-driven programs in Petriflow language are processes and their instances called cases. A class is a blueprint of an object and a Petriflow process is a blueprint of a Petriflow process instance. Simply, a Petriflow process is a class enriched by a workflow process that defines a life-cycle of the objects of that class.

More accurately, a Petriflow process consists of data, tasks and actions, roles, and a workflow process.

In the same way as in classes in OOP, data variables in Petriflow processes represent all attributes of a Petriflow process instance. The change of the value of a data variable can be triggered by a so-called *set-event*. Reading a value of a data variable can be triggered by a so-called *get-event*.

Tasks are the active parts of the Petriflow processes. Data variables can be associated with workflow tasks to define data fields and create task forms. A data field, which is an association of a data variable to a task, is given as a rich relation, that states

- whether a *get-event* and/or a *set-event* can trigger the data variable, i.e. whether its value is readable and/or editable,
- whether the value of data variable is required,
- what are valid values of the data variable within the data field.

Tasks have a simple life cycle: a task can be enabled, disabled or executed. Change of a state of a task can be triggered as follows:

- if a task is *enabled*, its change to the state executed can be triggered by a so-called *assign-event*
- if a task is *enabled*, its readable data fields are accessible for reading by *get-events*
- if a task is *executed*, its readable data fields are accessible for reading by *get-events*
- if a task is *executed*, its editable data fields can be changed to valid values by *set-events*
- if a task is *executed* and all its required data fields have valid values, its change to the state enabled or disabled can be triggered by a so-called *finish-event*.

Using the principles of event-driven programming, each data variable and each task has associated an event listener: whenever an *event* triggers a change of the value of a data variable or whenever an *event* triggers a change of the state of a task, then a reaction can be defined by pieces of code called *actions* in the event listener. Whenever an event is occurring, the actions in its event listener are executed. In *actions*, as a part of the code, *events* for tasks and events for data variables can be emitted. In this way, events and their reactions can create chains.

Roles or lists of users can be associated with events of tasks, defining for each task which users are authorized to emit events on that task. Similarly to data fields, association of users with events is a rich relation. For example, a user authorized to emit an *assign-event* of a task can emit the *assign-event*. By emitting the *assign-event*, this user has to choose one of the users that are authorized to possibly emit *finish-event* of this task and only this user is then authorized to emit *set-events* of editable data fields of this task and to emit *finish-event* of this task. In other words, by emitting *assign-event*, the authorized user

is assigning that task to a user (possibly himself), that is authorised to perform the task, i.e. to fill editable data fields and finish the task.

As a workflow process, Petriflow language uses place/transition Petri nets enriched by reset arcs, inhibitor arcs and read arcs to define the life cycle of the Petriflow process. Places of the Petri net represent the control variables. Transitions of Petri net represent tasks of the workflow process. A task is enabled, whenever the corresponding transition in the underlying Petri net is enabled. *Assign-event* occurring on this task consumes tokens from the input places of the corresponding transition and moves the state of the task to being executed. *Finish-event* on the task being executed produces tokens to the output places of the corresponding transition. In this way, the workflow process defines when a task is enabled, executed or disabled. Life-cycle of the Petriflow process is given as flow of assign/get/set/finish events on tasks and data variables respecting the restrictions on events given by the underlying Petri net.

When compared with relational databases, Petriflow processes correspond to tables, while instances (cases) of the Petriflow processes correspond to single records (rows) of a table. In a similar way to foreign keys in RDB and in similar way to attributes of objects containing references to other objects in OOP, data variables of Petriflow processes can store the references to instances of Petriflow processes and references to the task and list of tasks of Petriflow process instances. In this way one can easily share forms associated with one task as subforms within other tasks and to implement a single source of truth architecture.

### 3 Netgrif Application Engine

Netgrif Application Engine (NAE) is the tool for deploying and running process-driven applications written in Petriflow language. NAE is composed of several building blocks. The core of the NAE is Process Engine Server, that enables to:

- Upload, run and delete Petriflow processes
- Create, run and delete instances of processes
- Assign, finish and cancel tasks of process instances
- Read data variables and to save data variables
- Execute actions

Sometimes you do not want to change the process to react by action to an event. It usually happens if you want to react by the same action to more than one event in different processes. Rule Engine allows you to specify if-then decision rules written in MVEL expression language. Whenever an event is triggered, then Process Engine Server checks the Rule Engine, whether there is a rule such that its if condition is valid for the event. In such a case, the Rule Engine executes the then statement of the rule. In then statements of rules, you can trigger events of Process Engine Server. Rule Engine is based on Drools.

Process Engine Client provides a user interface in form of Angular components for displaying task lists, task forms and data fields. Process Engine Client

communicates via REST API with a Process Engine Server. Using web address of the Process Engine Client followed by the ID of a process instance, the list of enabled tasks of the created process instance, so-called case view, is displayed by the Process Engine Client. If the name of a process is used instead of ID of an instance, create event is triggered and the Process Engine Server creates a new process instance. You can see case view displayed in figure n. 1.

Title	Product	Quantity	Author
Order #7	Banana	7	Netgrif
Order #6		0	Netgrif

**Fig. 1.** Case view in Process Engine Client.

In task list you can expand a task to display the task form, triggering get events for all data fields. Once a task form with all its data fields is displayed, assign event of the task can be triggered. Once a task is assigned, cancel event can be triggered, set event for editable data fields can be triggered and when each required data field has a valid value, finish event of the task can be triggered.

Process Engine Server, Rule Engine and Process Engine Client together with a set of predefined processes for managing roles, users, authentication and authorization of the users, deploying Petriflow processes is provided as a Default Process Driven Application. Default Process Driven Application allows you to administrate the processes by deploying and deleting the processes, to invite users and to add/remove roles to users. It offers the functionality of registering users. For registered users, it offers the functionality of a task list, where you can assign and perform the tasks associated with one of the roles of the registered user filling the task forms by editing the data fields. For anonymous users, it offers the possibility to fill public tasks forms of public processes and to approach

the instances of the public processes via ID of the process instance.

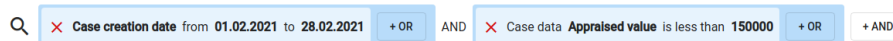
Even if the rich functionality of NAE and Petriflow is not enough, you can go beyond its functionality by overriding the predefined components. In this way, you can for example add new menu items associated with Petriflow filters, add connectors to your own systems or to customize the Angular components to be displayed according to your own design manual.

### 3.1 Search in NAE

As mentioned before, the Process Engine Client comes with a predefined library of Angular components. One of these components is the search component. The purpose of this component is to allow users to filter the cases or tasks that are displayed in the client. The search component can operate in two modes. The first, also called the fulltext mode, is a familiar input field that allows users to search for substring matches in case or process attributes predefined by the developers.

The second mode is a more recent addition to the Process Engine Client component library and the goal for its creation was to allow the users of the application to have a finer control over the created filter. This second search mode is more commonly called the advanced search mode. The filters it can create have a predefined structure, which is a conjunction of disjunctive clauses. The users can add as many clauses as they desire and each clause can also have an unlimited number of literals. The literals that can be used are the basic building blocks of the search component and are called search categories. The set of search categories, available when searching cases, is different from the categories, available when searching tasks. Each category represents a query on some attribute of the filtered objects. The way a certain attribute is queried is determined by a search operator. Each search category defines a set of operators that can be used with it. For most categories, this set is relatively straightforward. The only exception is the case data category, which queries a subset of the case's data set. The developers must mark data variables as available for searching, which determines the extent of this subset. It is the most complex category available as the queried data variable must be selected first, which in turn, based on the variable type, determines the set of available operators.

This design allows for a relatively high degree of freedom when creating a search query, without the need to write the underlying filters by hand. When even more complex filter are required, the developers can write them freely by hand as the underlying query language does not impose any structural limitations on the queries.

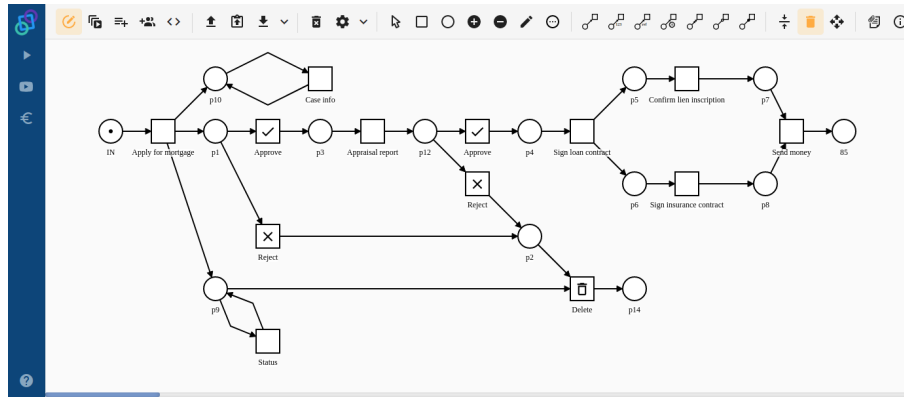


**Fig. 2.** Search component in advanced search mode

## 4 Netgrif Application Builder

Netgrif Application Builder (NAB) is the tool for building process-driven applications using Petriflow language. NAB is composed of several modules that help you in different stages of application development.

In Process Modeler you can model business processes by defining tasks and their routing and simulate modelled processes by executing sequences of tasks. As a modelling formalism for processes Petriflow language uses Petri nets that consist of state variables, tasks and their interconnections. It supports import of processes in BPMN 2.0 and its automatic translation into Petri nets. In figure n. 3 show us Process modeler with example net, which we use in our case study later.



**Fig. 3.** Screenshot of Process modeler with example net, which is explained later in case study.

In Role Editor, you can define roles and specify which roles can perform tasks in the process.

In Data Editor you can define data variables used in the processes. Petriflow supports all types of data variables you will need for your application, including text, numbers, date, datetime, enumerations and choices, files, images and many others. Validation and initial values of the data variables can be easily specified in Petriflow. Petriflow supports reference to a list of tasks as a data type.

In Form Builder, you can build the forms for single tasks by drag and drop either existing data variables or adding new data variables. For data variables on forms, called data fields, you can specify different attributes, such as placement in the form grid layout, choose the appropriate view such as different types of checkboxes, and determine, whether the data fields are editable, visible, required or hidden. Using reference to a list of tasks as a data field, you can embed subforms to forms.

In Action Editor you can program reactions on events of process instances, its tasks and data fields. Actions use Groovy as a programming language. Types of events that you can catch include construction of the process instance, assignment of a task to a user, cancellation of a task, finish a task, and change of a data field value. In actions that react on events, you can trigger events in different process instances and in this way for example create a new instance when you finish a task, to assign a new task to a user when you finish actual task, to recalculate a value of a data field whenever you change another data field, or hide/show data fields when you change another data field. Also, in actions you can use predefined search functions to find specific process instances or tasks based on values of process attributes, process instance attributes, task attributes and data variables. In actions, you can also call external functions as well as to send and receive data from external systems via REST or SOAP web services. The figure n. 5 show us a part of source code in Petriflow language.

Using NAB you can generate and download the source code in Petriflow language that includes all the necessary information about processes, their tasks, roles, data variables, forms and actions.

## 5 Case Study

In this case study, we chose to examine the Petri Net model shown in figure 3. It represents a simplified workflow of applying for a mortgage. The model starts with application form (transition Apply for mortgage) which is executed by a user with the client role.

After the mortgage application form is sent, the model splits into three parallel branches. The purpose of the upper and lower branches is to make some of the data variables accessible by the users of the application (transitions Case info and Status). The model continues with the middle branch (transitions Approve and Reject), where the loan officer either approves or rejects the mortgage application based on some internal criteria. This splits the process into two alternate branches.

The lower branch represents the possible deletion of the rejected application by the client. Note that this does not delete the model instance, as the bank still needs to keep the information, about the rejected mortgage application, and can still access the information, made available trough the Case info transition in the top-most branch. If the application was approved a Property appraiser must write an Appraisal report (transition Appraisal report). After the submission of the Appraisal report, the bank system approves or rejects the application (transitions Approve and Reject) based on some predefined business rules. In the simplified workflow, the application is automatically approved if the amount of money, asked in the mortgage application form, is smaller than the appraised value of the property. Should the application be rejected, it continues down the already described path, that leads to the deletion of the application by the client.

If the system approves the application, we consider the mortgage to be approved and the model continues with the signing of the contract by the client



**Fig. 4.** Part of exported source code in Petriflow language.

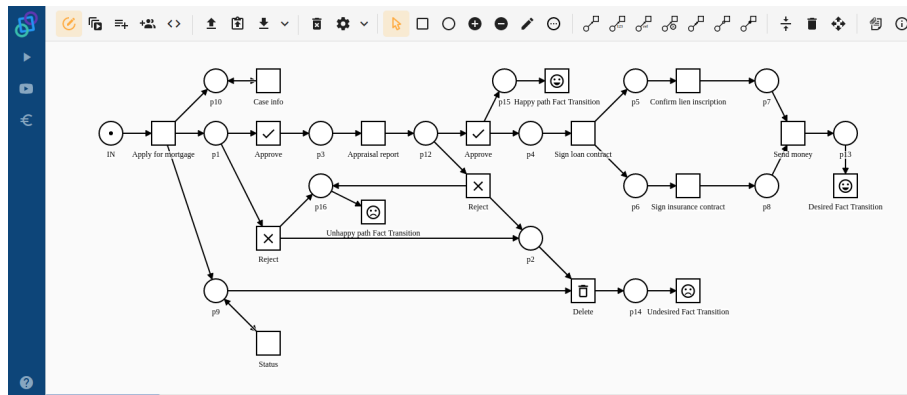
```

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  <role>
    <id>client</id>
    <title>Client</title>
  </role>
  ...
  <data type="text">
    <id>client_name</id>
    <title>Client's name</title>
    <desc>Please enter your name</desc>
  </data>
  ...
  <transition>
    <id>1</id>
    <x>240</x>
    <y>190</y>
    <label>Apply for mortgage</label>
    <roleRef>
      <id>client</id>
      <logic>
        <perform>true</perform>
      </logic>
    </roleRef>
    <dataRef>
      <id>client_name</id>
      <logic>
        <behavior>editable</behavior>
        <behavior>required</behavior>
      </logic>
    </dataRef>
    ...
    <event type="finish">
      <id>1_finish</id>
      <actions phase="pre">
        <action>
          ...
        </action>
      </actions>
    </event>
  </transition>
  ...
</document>

```

(transition Sign loan contract). After the contract was signed, the model is once again split into two parallel branches. In the upper branch, the Loan officer must confirm the lien inscription (transition Confirm lien inscription). In the lower branch the client signs an insurance contract for the mortgage with an insurance company (transition Sign insurance contract). When both of these tasks were completed, the Account clerk can send the money to the client (transition Send money).

We want to demonstrate with the help of this Petri net model, how our tool creates process nets for the instances of the model running in the application engine. We want to use the search capabilities described in section 3.1 to filter only instances in specific states. For this purpose we want to use fact transitions, as the search tool allows us to find instances which have a marking that allows a specified transition to be executed. For more information about fact transitions and their use for verification see. [9]. Fact transitions visualize facts in our model. Facts specify sets of desired and undesired markings of the Petri net. Since the search tool allows us to construct conjunction and disjunction queries, we could mark individual states with fact transitions and then used the search tool to filter only those instances where a specified combination of these transitions is executable. We added one desired fact transition at the end of the model, to find cases that successfully completed the entire mortgage application process, and one undesired fact transition after the Delete transition, to find cases that were rejected and deleted. Furthermore, we added one desired fact transition with a corresponding place that is enabled in any instance, where the mortgage was approved, as well as another undesired fact transition that is enabled in all instances, where the mortgage was rejected. The net containing all the fact transitions can be seen in figure 5. The fact transitions cannot be executed by any user, so once the instance reaches either of the states, we will always be able to find the instance.



**Fig. 5.** Business process net with added fact transitions.

In order to demonstrate how the tool can generate processes for running instances we have created two instance of the mortgage application model with fact transitions. In one of the instances we have executed the transitions that result in the instance reaching the desired state, in the other instance we executed the transitions that lead to the undesired state. The transitions that were executed in each instance can be seen in figures 6 and 7.

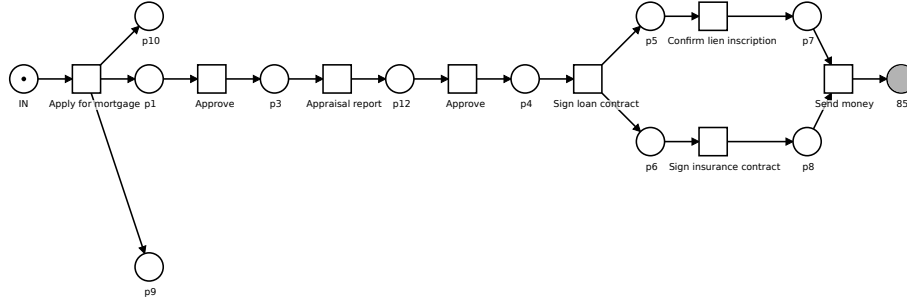


Fig. 6. Run of the case study net resulting in a desired state.

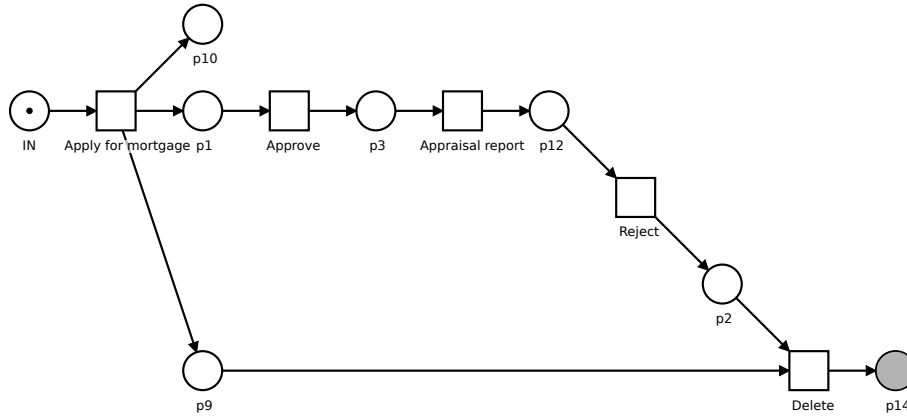
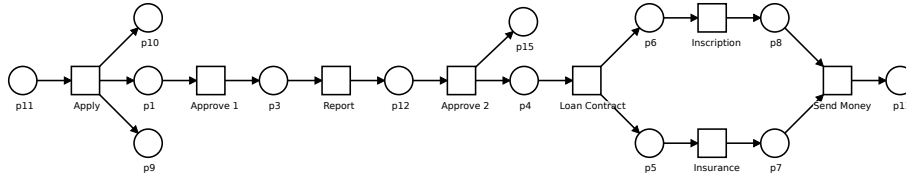


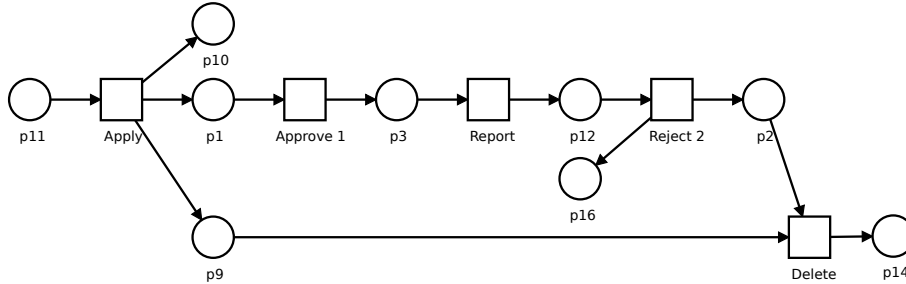
Fig. 7. Run of the case study net resulting in an undesired state.

Once we both instances reach their final state, we can use the fact transitions to find them in the application engine. We can use the search query to download the process nets of these two runs. The algorithm that we use to generate the processes is described in section 6. Once we download the process nets from our application we can open them in NAB. While the algorithm does place the elements of the process in such a way that the do not overlap, it does not attempt

to replicate the layout of the executed net. Therefore we changed the layout of the output by hand to resemble the original net more closely. No other changes were made to the generated process nets. We can see the process net of the instance that reached the desired state in figure 8 and of the instance with the undesired final state in figure 9. As we can see our tool export only the IDs of places and transitions from the original net. This is desired, as the original net contained two transitions named Approve and two transitions named Reject. The process net distinguishes between them by labeling all transitions and places with their IDs.



**Fig. 8.** Generated Process net of instance in desired state.



**Fig. 9.** Generated Process net of instance in undesired state.

As we can see this tool allows us to generate process nets for running instances of any model running in the application engine. We can then use the search interface to select a subset of all the available cases and download the generated process nets. We can use other tools to analyze the generated process nets, or we can examine them by hand to check if the deployed model behaves as expected.

## 6 Algorithm

If we want to generate runs for the instances that are present in the system, we need to represent them. Since our tool already has a working representation of Petri nets, we can reuse it. Because of this, we have decided to represent the

runs as Petri nets. We have created a new collection in MongoDB, a database in which we store every run as a document, we then created a mapping of running model instances to their corresponding runs.

When a new case is created a new Petri net representing its run is generated alongside it. This net initially contains only a set of places, where each place represents one token in the initial marking of the original net.

When the system or a user finishes any of the tasks, the run of the corresponding case must be updated. A new transition, that represents the executed task must be added to the run of the affected case. This new transition must consume and produce tokens according to the firing rule in the original net [8]. Each token, that ever existed in the original net, has a corresponding place in the net that represents the run. [8] Tokens that have already been consumed are connected by an arc with a transition that was fired at some point in the past [8].

In order to find the places that represent the tokens that have not yet been consumed we iterate over the arcs in the net, that represents the run. If the arc we are currently iterating over connects a place and a transition, we know that the token represented by the place has already been consumed. We collect the identifiers of such places. Once we have all the identifiers of the places that represent the consumed tokens, we can iterate over all the places and filter the consumed places out, which leaves us only with the places that represent tokens that have not yet been consumed.

If a transition in the original net produces multiple tokens into a single place, each token will be represented by a single place in the run [8]. When a transition is fired and consumes some of these tokens, it doesn't care which exact tokens are consumed, only their quantity is important [8]. Because of this we need to group the tokens by the place they originated from. Once we have the tokens grouped, we can update the run with the new transition.

Updating the run is simple, we add a new transition, connect it to the existing unconsumed places based on the tokens it consumes in the original net and we add new places based on the tokens it produces. Since we have the places grouped we have access to the required objects in the required quantities. Since the original net enforces the firing rule [8], we know, there must be enough places in the run to connect the new transition to.

The order in which we choose which of the yet unconsumed token are consumed is important, because it creates dependencies between transitions fired in the past and the new transition in the run [8]. Since we only create one run per case, it could be beneficial to choose the places to consume at random, in order to cover all the possible dependencies with multiple cases. In reality the choice is determined by the order of iteration and since all the collections used in the implementation impose some ordering all the runs generated by the same firing sequence will also be the same. However, modifying the implementation to choose the places at random would not be difficult.

Since we reused the existing Petri net representation to represent the runs, for export we would use the same structure as for import into NAE or NAB.

We declared the structure using JAXB Annotations and using JAXB Marshaller we created and exported it for a given individual run. Since we want to export multiple instances at once, we need to add filtering of instances. The search tool that is a part of NAE and, which we used to filter the instances is described in section 3.1. One of the available search categories filters cases based on the executable tasks in them. With the help of this search category we can filter the instances based on the fact transitions, as described in section 5. The created search query must be sent to the exporter service, for this reason we declare a new REST controller. The controller uses the query to find the running instances and by extension their runs. Afterwards we call the service that exports each run instance, the exported files are then added to a ZIP archive, which is uploaded as a blob object that the browser automatically downloads.

## 7 Future work

When using the formal definition of the Petriflow Language to design business processes and the subsequent generation of individual runs for a given process, it is appropriate to think about generating not only the basic elements of Petri nets into runs but also extending parts used by the Petriflow language. We must consider which parts have a business or analytical benefit for us. Using every element of Petriflow can be confusing. Individual runs are used to describe the run of a given business model, we would like to describe any step or action that happens in an instance of business models using its valid representation. Petriflow language uses not only the basic arcs but also read and inhibitor arcs, which we describe in section 2. Using the read arcs in the business model, we can fire given transition multiple times and each firing is generated into an individual run as a separate instance of the task. But if we use valid representation for firing a read arc we can simplify generated individual runs and make them more usable.

In the future, we want to export our the individual runs to the structure that can be taken as an input to the appropriate process mining tools such as Prime Miner [10], or create our own tool for process run analysis based on Petriflow language, which will be included in the NAB or NAE.

Petriflow language includes the structure of data that can be changed on some tasks. For future implementation, we want to have implemented recording of each change of data in the individual runs. Recorded data must be bind to the transition where the change was applied, for the reverse analysis.

Currently we only record the executed transitions of the model in the process net. In the future we would like to expand the logging capabilities to include additional information, such as execution of various events in the system (assignment/cancellation of tasks, setting of new data values) enriched with information about the actors (user and role information). These enriched logs could then be used for a more in-depth analysis of the deployed models.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper we presented an extension of Netgrif Application Engine, an interpreter of Petriflow language. For Petriflow processes built on place/transition Petri nets this module stores the history of single cases in form of process nets. The module also enables to filter existing cases according to queries and to export produced process nets in separate XML files. These process nets can be used for further analysis of the deployed processes or for process mining of filtered behavior. The builder for Petriflow processes is free available at <https://builder.netgrif.com/modeler> and the NAE together with the new module presented in this paper can be freely used after registration at <https://academy.netgrif.com/>.

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