

TESTING A CONTROL SYSTEM INCLUDING A VALVE

Field of the Invention

5 This invention relates to testing a control system including a valve.

Background of the Invention

Control valves of control systems for subsea fluid production wells are often operated infrequently (e.g. every 6 months or less). A problem is that there may be a fault in the system which would not be apparent until the well operator tries to operate the valve. Discovery of the failure in an emergency situation could be disastrous.

Systems according to embodiments of this invention enable the well operator to be given advance notice of a failure, thus substantially reducing the possibility of discovery of a system failure only in an emergency situation. Systems according to embodiments of the invention frequently test the communications, control circuitry, monitoring circuitry, wiring to the valve and a solenoid coil of a solenoid for operating the valve, without actually operating it. Thus, if it is known that there is a problem before the function is actually needed, reliability can be increased by scheduling such a test during scheduled maintenance.

Summary of the Invention

20 The present invention is defined by the accompanying claims.

More particularly, according to the present invention from one aspect, there is provided a method of testing a control system including a valve which is operable by a solenoid, the method comprising applying a current through a coil of the solenoid, the current being insufficient to cause the solenoid to operate the valve, and monitoring a response of the system to the current.

Said response could be monitored by monitoring current in the system, for example current through the coil, or by monitoring voltage across the coil.

Typically, the valve is a subsea directional control valve of a subsea fluid extraction well having a topside control location. In this case, the application of said current through the coil could be caused from the topside location of the fluid extraction well.

The application of said current through said coil is preferably effected at intervals.

According to the present invention from another aspect, there is provided a control system including a valve which is operable by a solenoid, the system comprising means for applying
 5 a current through a coil of the solenoid, the current being insufficient to cause the solenoid to operate the valve, and means for monitoring a response of the system to the current.

Said monitoring means could be adapted for monitoring current in the system, for example current through the coil, or monitoring voltage across the coil.

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Typically, the valve is a subsea directional control valve of a control system for a subsea fluid extraction well having a topside control location. In this case, the topside location could include means for applying said current through the coil.

15 Typically, the system includes means for comparing a result of monitoring said response with at least one expected result.

The system could include means whereby the application of said current through said coil is effected at intervals.

20 Embodiments of the invention prove the reliable operation of a subsea valve by testing the communications, control circuitry, monitoring circuitry, wiring and a solenoid coil at regular intervals, generally at a much greater frequency than the valve is used in operation. This is achieved by taking advantage of the fact that the current necessary to drive a valve
 25 operating solenoid ramps up relatively slowly. By firing the solenoid coil for only a short period of time, this current can be sensed to verify that all the necessary elements are working correctly. The power to the solenoid coil is turned off before current has ramped up enough to operate the valve.

Brief Description of the Drawings

30 Fig. 1 is a graph of current against time for a typical current flow through the solenoid coil of a directional control valve (DCV) within a subsea control system when the valve is operated;

Fig. 2 is a schematic diagram of a control system for a subsea well operating in accordance with a first embodiment of the invention;

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Fig. 3 shows details of current sensing means of the system of Fig. 2;

Fig. 4 is a schematic diagram of a control system for a subsea well operating in accordance with a second embodiment of the invention; and

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Fig. 5 shows details of voltage sensing means of the system of Fig. 4.

Description of Embodiments of the Invention

10 Fig. 1 is a graph of current against time for a typical current flow through the solenoid coil of the solenoid of a directional control valve (DCV) at a tree within a control system for a subsea fluid extraction well when the valve is operated. As can be seen, the current rise from the application of the supply voltage to the solenoid coil is not instantaneous, due to the inductance of the solenoid coil, but ramps up to the point B on the graph, in, typically,
15 between 50 and 300 milliseconds, when the solenoid mechanically operates. The current continues to rise until it reaches a steady state level determined by the resistance of the solenoid coil and the supply voltage, which is high enough to ensure that the solenoid is held in the 'operated' condition. In embodiments of the invention, the current in the DCV solenoid coil is allowed to rise to level A, typically after 10 to 20 milliseconds, which is
20 insufficient to operate the solenoid but sufficient to be detected to provide confidence that at least the control communications, circuitry and wiring, including the DCV solenoid coil itself, are functioning correctly. In a preferred embodiment, the current in the DCV solenoid coil is detected by monitoring the voltage across a small resistor connected in series with the solenoid coil.

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Operation of the DCVs of a well control system for a subsea well is normally controlled from a surface platform via a complex communication system, a typical example of which (modified in accordance with an embodiment of the invention) is illustrated in Fig. 2. The command signal to operate a DCV, as a well operating function, is generated at a surface
30 platform 1 by a well control and monitoring arrangement 2 and is transmitted via a modem 3 at the platform through a surface to subsea well umbilical 4 to a subsea control module (SCM), which houses a subsea electronics module (SEM), which in turn houses a subsea modem 5 and an Ethernet switch blade (ESB) 6 and a single board computer (SBC) 7. The ESB 6 and SBC 7 are features of modern subsea well communications, and handle the
35 control signals to the multiplicity of drivers for the DCVs on the well. The SBC 7 is located in a directional control valve support module (DSM) containing a power supply 8, power control 9 and control logic 10 to output supply voltage to the solenoid coils of DCVs located in the

SCM via an H bridge 11 and connectors and wiring 12. In the system diagram Fig. 2, a DCV solenoid coil 13 of only one DCV is shown for simplicity.

Testing of the control system routing comprising the communications, control circuitry, monitoring, wiring and solenoid coil, by a current flow sensing method is effected by the well control and monitoring arrangement 2 being programmed to command power control module 9, via the communication route described above, to output a power supply pulse to the solenoid coil 13, for a limited duration of typically 10 to 20 milliseconds. Although the route of the command signal is the same as the normal operational route, the test command message includes a 'test tag' in the message so that the SBC 7 produces only the required 10 to 20 ms current drive through the DCV solenoid coil 13 rather than the continuous DC input to the coil under operational conditions. The current passing through the solenoid coil also passes through a small value, typically 1% of the coil resistance, resistor 14, as shown in Fig. 3 which is an expansion of current sensing means 15 between bridge 11 and connectors and wiring 12. The small voltage produced across the resistor 14 due to the current flowing through the coil 13, is amplified by an operational amplifier 16, with the gain set by resistors 17 and 18, to provide a suitable voltage level to an analogue to digital converter (A/D) 19. The digital output 20 of the A/D 19 represents the current flow through the coil 13 and is fed to the SBC 7, where it can either be sent back to the surface platform via the communication system for verification, or it can be compared, in the SBC 7, with stored values of correct expected test values and a verification or otherwise message sent to the surface platform 1. Thus, confidence is provided that the complex control signal routing is functioning correctly, and that the solenoid coil drive and coil continuity is correct. Operation of the test routine can be effected by the well operator and/or automatically at regular intervals by suitable programming of the well control and monitoring arrangement 2 at the surface platform.

The current sensing means 15 could be elsewhere than as shown. For example, it could be immediately before the solenoid coil 13, after the coil 13, before the H bridge 11 or anywhere suitable in the control system.

As an alternative to monitoring current by monitoring the voltage drop across a resistor, current sensing means 15 could be provided using a Hall effect device.

An alternative method of securing confidence that the control of DCVs via the well communication system is functioning correctly, without operating a valve, is to monitor the voltage pulse appearing across the coil 13, when the test pulse is applied. This is illustrated

in Figs. 4 and 5, there being voltage sensing means 21 in Fig. 4 between bridge 11 and connectors and wiring 12. The voltage sensing means 21 is detailed in Fig. 5, the voltage across the coil 13 being connected to an A/D converter 22. Items in Fig. 4 which correspond with items in Fig. 2 have the same reference numerals as in Fig. 2. The digital output 23 of the A/D converter 22 represents the test voltage across the coil 13 and is fed to the SBC 7 where it again can either be sent to the surface platform for verification, or compared in the SBC 7, with stored values of correct expected test values and a verification, or otherwise, message sent to the surface platform. This method of verification of the correct functioning of the DCV coil drive does have the disadvantage over the current flow method of not providing confidence in the continuity of the solenoid coil itself.

Advantages of using the Invention

The revenue generated from an oil well can be millions of US dollars per day, which would be lost if the production ceased because of a faulty valve circuit. The cost to fix this problem can be hundreds of thousands of US dollars per day for the boat/submarine hire to recover and replace the faulty equipment from the seabed. Worse still if the fault occurs outside an operational weather window, then the maintenance might not be possible for several months with the corresponding several months of lost production. This invention enables detection of faulty equipment involved with the well valve control system before it is needed, thus allowing any detected faulty component to be changed as part of scheduled maintenance.

CLAIMS:

1. A method of testing a control system including a valve which is operable by a solenoid, the method comprising applying a current through a coil of the solenoid, the current
5 being insufficient to cause the solenoid to operate the valve, and monitoring a response of the system to the current.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein said response is monitored by monitoring current in the system.
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3. A method according to claim 2, wherein said response is monitored by monitoring current through the coil.
4. A method according to claim 1, wherein said response is monitored by monitoring
15 voltage across the coil.
5. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein the valve is a subsea directional control valve of a subsea fluid extraction well having a topside control location.
- 20 6. A method according to claim 5, wherein the application of said current through the coil is caused from the topside location of the fluid extraction well.
7. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein a result of monitoring said response is compared with at least one expected result.
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8. A method according to claim 7 as dependent on either of claims 5 and 6, wherein said response is compared with at least one expected result subsea.
9. A method according to claim 8, wherein a result of the comparison is sent to the
30 topside location.
10. A method according to claim 6, wherein an indication of the result of monitoring is sent to the topside location.
- 35 11. A control system including a valve which is operable by a solenoid, the system comprising means for applying a current through a coil of the solenoid, the current being

insufficient to cause the solenoid to operate the valve, and means for monitoring a response of the system to the current.

5 12. A system according to claim 11, wherein said monitoring means is adapted for monitoring current in the system.

13. A system according to claim 12, wherein said monitoring means is adapted for monitoring current through the coil.

10 14. A system according to claim 11, wherein said monitoring means is adapted for monitoring voltage across the coil.

15 15. A system according to any of claims 11 to 14, wherein the valve is a subsea directional control valve of a control system for a subsea fluid extraction well having a topside control location.

16. A system according to claim 15, wherein the topside location includes means for applying said current through the coil.

20 17. A system according to any of claims 11 to 16, including means for comparing a result of monitoring said response with at least one expected result.

25 18. A system according to claim 17 as dependent on either of claims 15 and 16, wherein said comparing means is located subsea.

19. A system according to claim 18, including means for sending a result of the comparison to the topside location.

30 20. A system according to claim 16, including means for sending an indication of the result of monitoring to the topside location.