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(54) **WELDING PROCESS**

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See application file for complete search history.

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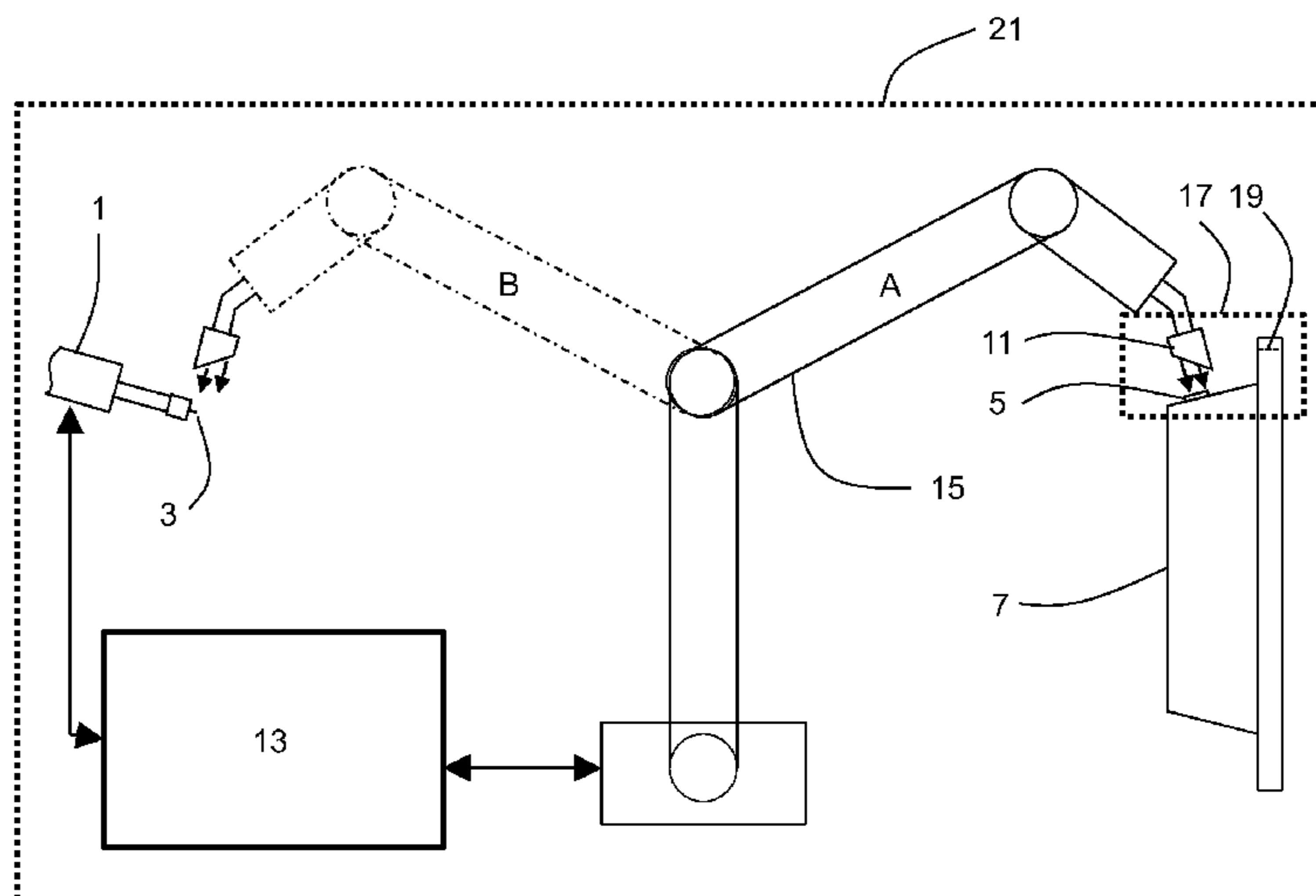
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method and apparatus for welding a first component to a second component. A scanning head is positionally calibrated within a localised work envelope including the components, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope. Profiles of the components are scanned within the localised work envelope using the calibrated scanning head. A cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges to be welded within a space envelope is generated from the scanned profiles. A robotic welding torch electrode tip is scanned using the calibrated scanning head to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope. The components are welded using the torch, the torch controlled using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position such that the electrode tip is held at pre-determined stand-off positions around the components during the welding.

11 Claims, 1 Drawing Sheet



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Fig. 1

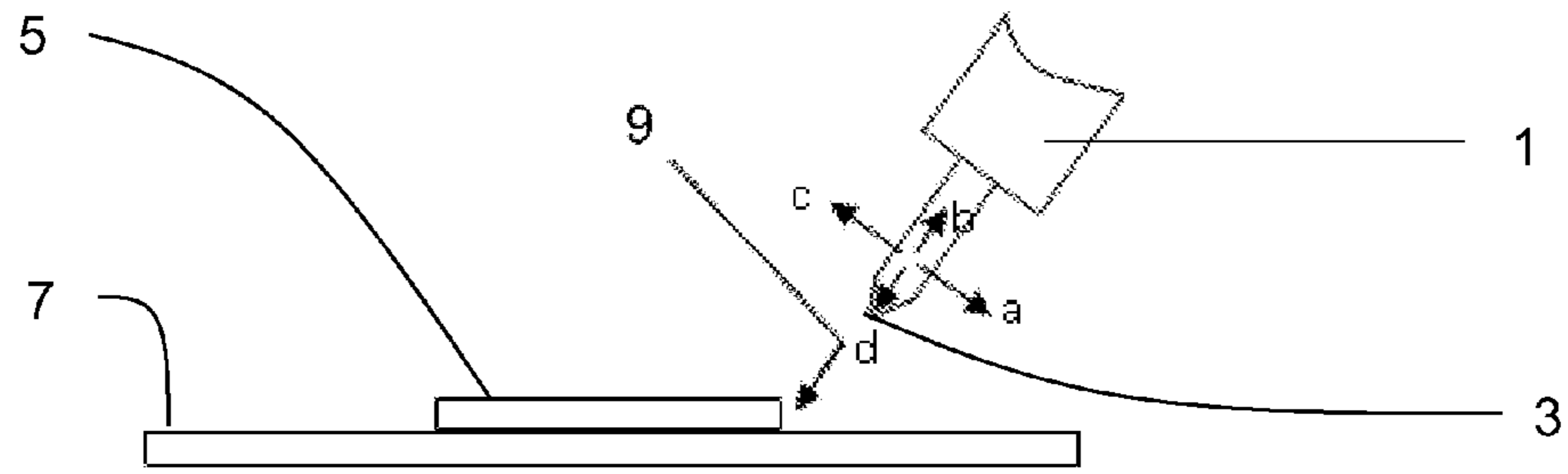
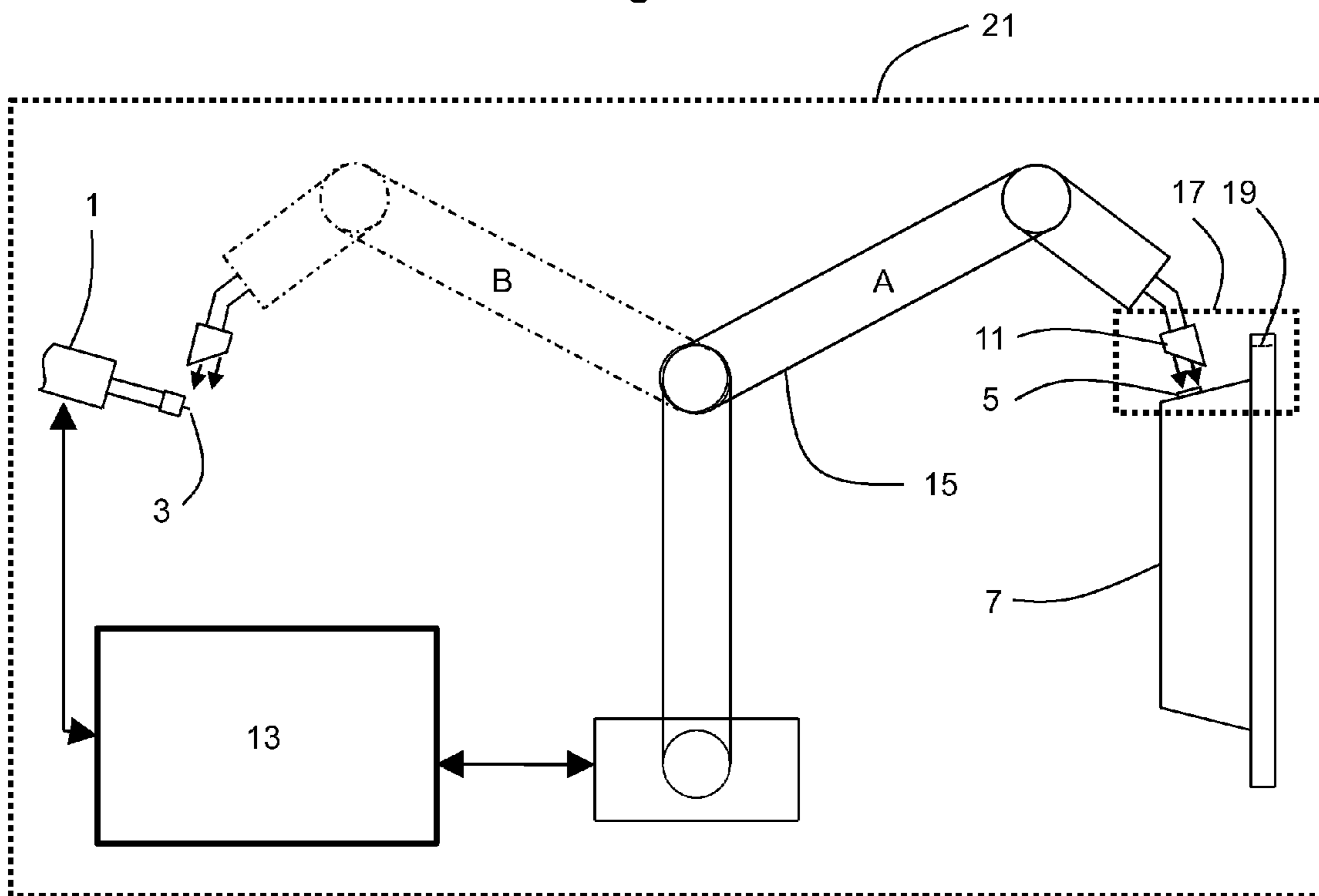


Fig. 2



1**WELDING PROCESS**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a method and apparatus for welding a first component to a second component.

BACKGROUND

In known manual and semi-automatic welding processes, location of component edge and surface height is typically reliant on an operators 'hand to eye' coordination. There may be some part-to-part variation in parts to be welded, including, for example, edge or surface variation between parts. Accordingly, it may be necessary to make adjustments to the welding process to accommodate for such part-to-part variation. Typically, this is achieved by manual operator adjustment. The quality of weld produced can therefore vary, depending on the skill of the operator. Control of component edge and surface height location in relation to the weld torch electrode position during welding is important, as variation of these parameters may have large impact on resultant weld quality. Variable weld quality between products is undesirable from a view of achieving high production repeatability between parts. Additionally, variable weld quality can lead to reduced predictability in estimating the expected lifetime of the welded product.

To remove or reduce the effect of manual operator influence on variability of the welding process, it is known to automate, or semi-automate, welding processes. However, this suffers a problem that robotic automation removes the visual feedback loop and control provided by the operator for detection of component edge location and surface height. Accordingly, where there is 'part-to-part' edge or surface variation, there remains a problem of variation in weld quality, and repeatability of the welding process, even in an automated or semi-automated process.

SUMMARY

The present invention aims to address the above problems. In a general aspect, the present invention provides location and spatial relationship capability to a robotic welding process.

Thus, in a first aspect, the present invention provides a method for welding a first component to a second component, including:

positionally calibrating a scanning head within a localised work envelope including the first component and the second component, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope;

scanning profiles of the first component and the second component within the localised work envelope using the calibrated scanning head;

generating from the scanned profiles a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges to be welded within a space envelope;

scanning an electrode tip of a robotic welding torch using the calibrated scanning head to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope; and

welding the first component to the second component using the robotic welding torch, wherein the robotic welding torch is controlled using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the elec-

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trode tip such that the electrode tip is held at pre-determined stand-off positions around the components during the welding.

Note that it is not necessary to perform the steps of the method in the order stated above. For example, it is possible to scan the electrode tip of the robotic welding torch before scanning the profiles of the first component and the second component within the localised work envelope.

In a second aspect, the invention provides a computer control system programmed to control a scanning head and a robotic welding torch to perform the method of the first aspect.

In a third aspect, the invention provides an apparatus for welding a first component to a second component, including: a scanning head; a robotic welding torch; and the computer control system of the second aspect. For example, an apparatus for welding a first component to a second component, may include;

a scanning head;

a robotic welding torch; and

a computer control system;

wherein the computer control system is programmed to: positionally calibrate the scanning head within a localised work envelope including the first component and the second component, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope;

use the scanning head to scan profiles of the first component and the second component within the localised work envelope using the calibrated scanning head;

generate from the scanned profiles a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges to be welded within a space envelope;

use the scanning head to scan an electrode tip of the robotic welding torch to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope; and

use the robotic welding torch to weld the first component to the second component, wherein the robotic welding torch is controlled by the control system using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the electrode tip such that the electrode tip is held at pre-determined stand-off positions around the components during the welding.

The present invention can therefore provide the ability to remove operator influence and operator-to-operator variation from the welding process, whilst retaining the ability to compensate for part-to-part variation between components to be welded, by providing image-based control of the welding process.

Typically the localised work envelope is a region in which the welding of the first component to the second component occurs. Thus the size of the localised work envelope may be a similar order of magnitude, or slightly bigger, than that of the welded components. Thus calibration of the scanning head with reference to at least one datum feature located within the localised work envelope, and scanning the profile of the first and second components with the localised work envelope, enables the invention to reduce the effect of robotic repeatability inaccuracies by reducing or minimising the travel range of the scanning head post calibration.

By scanning the position of the electrode tip to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope, the invention can also reduce or minimise the impact of variation in the electrode setting process on

weld repeatability between multiple electrodes. Typically the space envelope is a region containing the localised work envelope.

The invention may thus improve both weld quality and repeatability, and corresponding product quality and repeatability. This may decrease product unit cost and lead-time, and can also improve predictability in estimating the expected lifetime of the welded product.

Further aspects of the present invention provide: a computer program comprising code which, when run on a computer, causes the computer to control a scanning head and a robotic welding torch to perform the method of the first aspect; and a computer readable medium storing a computer program comprising code which, when run on a computer, causes the computer to control a scanning head and a robotic welding torch to perform the method of the first aspect.

Optional features of the invention will now be set out. These are applicable singly or in any combination with any aspect of the invention.

The scanning head may be positionally calibrated along x, y, z linear orthogonal axes within the localised work envelope. There is at least one, and there may be multiple datum features located within the localised work envelope, to assist in positional calibration of the scanning head. Datum features may be located on, for example, the first and/or second components to be welded. Alternatively or additionally, datum features may be located on a support structure to which the first and/or second components are mounted. The, or each, datum feature may consist of a slot, pocket, hole, face or any other artefact that can provide a suitable calibration feature for the scanning head.

Before positionally calibrating the scanning head, the method may include a further step of positioning the scanning head by reference to a master theoretical model of the first and second components' positions within the space envelope. This can facilitate positioning of the scanning head in the correct general position with relation to the first and second components.

The scanning head may be attached to a robotic arm. The robotic arm may be moveable. In particular, the robotic arm may have a first orientation for scanning profiles of the first component and the second component, and a second orientation for scanning the electrode tip of the robotic welding torch. The robotic arm may be controllable to move between these two orientations.

The method may further include a step of determining, from the cloud point data image of surfaces and edges to be welded, whether predetermined weld joint characteristics are satisfied, such that the welding of the first component to the second component can be stopped in the case that predetermined weld joint characteristics are not satisfied. This determination may be considered a pre-weld inspection step. The predetermined joint characteristics may include alignment of the first and second component, or join fit up. For example, if it is determined that the first and second components are mal-aligned, conditional stops may be applied to stop or prevent welding of the first and second components. This determination step has a benefit over similar steps performed by a manual operator in conventional processes, as actual variable data can be obtained from the scanned images, rather than subjective attribute data obtained by e.g. human visual inspection.

The scanning head may include a 3D optical visualiser that scans and characterises the geometry of the components to be welded. This can enable vision-based control of the welding process. For example, the scanning head may

include a line laser and CCD camera setup, such as that used in DE4201523A. However, any suitable scanning head which is capable of scanning profiles of the components to be welded such that a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges may be generated from the scanned profiles may be used. For example, a tactile scanning probe (e.g. from a coordinate measuring machine) could be used.

The welding to be performed may be tungsten inert gas (TIG) welding, but may also be applicable to other welding processes, including, but not limited to, laser (e.g. fibre laser), plasma and resistance welding. The welding process is not particularly restricted to a particular welding geometry. The invention may be particularly advantageous in a lap welding, or a butt welding configuration, but may also be used in, for example, fillet welding or other joint geometries. The welding process is also not particularly restricted to materials, or material thicknesses.

Whilst the invention has so far been discussed in relation to welding, it can also be applied in relation to other types of assembly, such as mechanical fastening. More particularly, the robotic welding torch can be replaced by a robotic mechanical fastener having a fastening tool instead of a welding torch. This can be used to automate manual assembly operations such as riveting, bolting etc. by using the vision capability for detection of hole positions in relation to fasteners and for gap checking where consistent gap setting is required. Benefits can be reduced process cost, improved product quality, and process repeatability.

Thus in a fourth aspect, the invention provides a method for mechanically fastening (e.g. riveting, bolting etc.) a first component to a second component, including:

- positionally calibrating a scanning head within a localised work envelope including the first component and the second component, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope;

- scanning profiles of the first component and the second component within the localised work envelope using the calibrated scanning head;

- generating from the scanned profiles a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges to be assembled within a space envelope;

- scanning a fastening tool (e.g. a handling gripper, rivet gun etc.) of a robotic mechanical fastener using the calibrated scanning head to determine a defined coordinate position of the fastening tool within the space envelope; and

- fastening the first component to the second component using the robotic mechanical fastener, wherein the robotic mechanical fastener is controlled using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the fastening tool such that the fastening tool is held at pre-determined stand-off positions around the components during the fastening.

In a fifth aspect, the invention provides a computer control system programmed to control a scanning head and a robotic mechanical fastener to perform the method of the fourth aspect.

In a sixth aspect, the invention provides an apparatus for mechanically fastening a first component to a second component, including: a scanning head; a robotic mechanical fastener; and the computer control system of the fifth aspect.

For example, an apparatus for mechanically fastening a first component to a second component, may include:

- a scanning head;
- a robotic mechanical fastener; and

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a computer control system;
 wherein the computer control system is programmed to:
 positionally calibrate the scanning head within a localised
 work envelope including the first component and the
 second component, the positional calibration being

referenced to at least one datum feature within the work
 envelope;

use the scanning head to scan profiles of the first com-
 ponent and the second component within the localised
 work envelope using the calibrated scanning head;

generate from the scanned profiles a cloud point data
 image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and
 edges to be assembled within a space envelope;

use the scanning head to scan a fastening tool of the
 robotic mechanical fastener to determine a defined
 coordinate position of the fastening tool within the
 space envelope; and

use the robotic mechanical fastener to fasten the first
 component to the second component, wherein the
 robotic mechanical fastener is controlled by the control
 system using the cloud point data image and the defined
 coordinate position of the fastening tool such that the
 fastening tool is held at pre-determined stand-off posi-
 tions around the components during the fastening.

Further aspects of the present invention provide: a com-
 puter program comprising code which, when run on a
 computer, causes the computer to control a scanning head
 and a robotic mechanical fastener to perform the method of
 the fourth aspect; and a computer readable medium storing
 a computer program comprising code which, when run on a
 computer, causes the computer to control a scanning head
 and a robotic mechanical fastener to perform the method of
 the fourth aspect. Brief Description of the Drawings.

Embodiments of the invention will now be described by
 way of example with reference to the accompanying draw-
 ings in which:

FIG. 1 shows schematically location of a welding torch in
 relation to components to be welded; and

FIG. 2 shows schematically an apparatus for welding a
 first component to a second component.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION AND FURTHER OPTIONAL FEATURES

FIG. 1 shows schematically location of a welding torch **1**
 having an electrode tip **3** in relation to first **5** and second **7**
 components to be welded along a work piece join **9**. Direc-
 tions a, b, c, d show possible relative movement of the
 welding torch in relation to the work piece join. For
 example, directions a, c relate to offset of the electrode tip
 from the component edge, and directions b, d relate to the
 stand-off distance of the electrode tip from the work piece
 join. The position of the electrode tip in each of these
 directions a, b, c, d is controlled during welding of the first
 and second components along the work piece join **9** in order
 to control component edge and surface height location in
 relation to the weld torch electrode position. Accurate con-
 trol over these factors can improve the quality of the
 resultant weld produced.

FIG. 2 shows an apparatus for welding the first compo-
 nent **5** to the second component **7**. The apparatus includes a
 scanning head **11**, a robotic welding torch **1** and a control
 system **13**. Here, the scanning head is conveniently attached
 to a robotic arm **15** having a first orientation A for scanning
 profiles of the first component and the second component,
 and a second orientation B for scanning the electrode tip **3**
 of the robotic welding torch.

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The scanning head **11** may incorporate a line laser and
 CCD camera setup, such as that described in DE4201523A,
 to perform the scanning. For example, a suitable 3D optical
 vision system may be the VIRO WSI Weld Seam Inspection
 provided by Vitronic™ system. This can be robot or gantry-
 mounted and is conventionally used to scan and characterise
 the geometry of completed weld joints using laser line and
 optical sensors to subsequently measure and record the weld
 seam length, width, position, volume and height relative to
 the surrounding parent material. However, in the present
 apparatus, the optical vision system is used to scan profiles
 of the components **5**, **7** before they are welded. The VIRO
 WSI system uses a 3D stripe measurement principle, which
 is a triangulation method involving moving the weld under
 a sensor or moving a sensor across a weld to scan the weld
 and acquire data. The system's laser emitter creates line
 stripes (structured light), and optical signals deflected from
 the surface are received by a matrix camera (CCD that works
 as a video, rather than still, camera) that records a surface
 pattern profile. The deflection of the beam from the surface
 depends upon the changes in surface characteristics.

The control system **13** is adapted to control the welding
 torch **1**, the robotic arm **15** and the scanning head **11**. More
 particularly, the control system is adapted to positionally
 calibrate the scanning head **11** within a localised work
 envelope **17**, the positional calibration being referenced to
 one or more datum features **19** within the localised work
 envelope. Conveniently, the scanning head is positionally
 calibrated along x, y, z linear orthogonal axes within the
 localised work envelope. This positional calibration within
 (rather than outside) the localised work envelope can reduce
 the effect of robotic repeatability inaccuracies, by reducing
 or minimising travel range of the scanning head post cali-
 bration. The localised work envelope is located within a
 larger space envelope **21**, which includes the electrode tip **3**
 of the robotic welding torch **1**.

As an additional step, before positional calibration of the
 scanning head **11** within the localised work envelope **17**, the
 scanning head may be positioned with reference to a master
 theoretical model of the first and second components' posi-
 tions within the space envelope **21**. This can improve speed
 and accuracy of calibration of the scanning head as the
 scanning head can be positioned in the correct general
 vicinity of the datum feature and localised work envelope
 before calibration is attempted.

After positional calibration of the scanning head **11**, the
 scanning head scans profiles of the first component **5** and the
 second component **7** within the localised work envelope. A
 cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of the
 surfaces and edges to be welded along work piece joins **9**
 within the space envelope **21** is generated from the scanned
 profiles of the first and second components.

Following scanning of the first and second components,
 the robotic arm **15** moves from the first orientation A to the
 second orientation B. The scanning head then scans the
 electrode tip **3** of the robotic welding torch **1** using the
 calibrated scanning head to determine a defined coordinate
 position of the electrode tip within the space envelope.

Optionally, before the first component **5** and the second
 component **7** are welded together, the process includes a
 further step of determining, from the cloud point data image
 of surfaces and edges to be welded, whether predetermined
 weld joint characteristics (including, for example, alignment
 of the first and second components) are satisfied, such that
 the welding of the first component to the second component
 can be stopped in the case that predetermined weld joint
 characteristics are not satisfied.

The first component **5** and the second component **7** are then welded together along work piece joints **9** using the robotic welding torch **1**. The control system **13** is adapted to control movement of the robotic welding torch within the space envelope **21**, and the robotic welding torch is controlled and tracked using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the electrode tip **3** such that the electrode tip is held at pre-determined stand-off positions in all axes around the components during the welding process. By controlling the stand-off position of the electrode tip **3** from the work piece join **9** in such a manner, control of component edge and surface height location in relation to the welding torch electrode tip position during welding may be more accurately achieved compared to that achieved by manual operator adjustment. Accordingly, the resultant weld quality can be improved, by removing operator-to-operator variation, introducing greater repeatability and eliminating fatigue-induced errors which may occur in typical known manually-operated processes. This can lead to further benefits including improvements in product quality and repeatability, and corresponding reductions in product unit cost and lead-time. Predictability in estimating the expected lifetime of the welded product may also be improved.

In summary, the above-described apparatus can provide optical vision capability for component edge and surface detection within an automated or robotic environment, translating the captured cloud point data into defined coordinate positions within a space envelope to be used for pre-weld acceptance and to provide in-cycle control of a TIG welding electrode in relation to actual component geometry. The process can also provide variable data capture on joint condition and provide automated pre-weld inspection and decision making. The process can also reduce the impact of variation within the electrode setting process.

While the invention has been described in conjunction with the exemplary embodiments described above, many equivalent modifications and variations will be apparent to those skilled in the art when given this disclosure. For example, although described above in relation to TIG welding, the welding may be another type of welding process. More generally, the invention can be applied to robotised mechanical fastening, where instead of a robotic welding tool, the scanning head is used to scan a fastening tool of a robotic mechanical fastener, which is then controlled using the cloud point data image obtained by the scanning head. Accordingly, the exemplary embodiments of the invention set forth above are considered to be illustrative and not limiting. Various changes to the described embodiments may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

All references referred to above are hereby incorporated by reference.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method for welding a first component to a second component, the method comprising:
 positionally calibrating a scanning head within a localised work envelope, the work envelope being defined by boundaries surrounding the first component and the second component, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope;
 scanning profiles of the first component and the second component within the work envelope using the calibrated scanning head;
 generating, from the scanned profiles, a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and

edges of the first component and the second component to be welded within a space envelope, the space envelope being larger than the work envelope, which is located inside the space envelope;
 scanning an electrode tip of a robotic welding torch using the calibrated scanning head to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope, the electrode tip of the robotic welding torch being located outside of the work envelope at a time of scanning the electrode tip; and
 welding the first component to the second component using the robotic welding torch, movement of the robotic welding torch being controlled using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the electrode tip, such that the electrode tip is held at a plurality of pre-determined stand-off positions around the first component and the second component within the work envelope during the welding.

2. The method of claim **1**, wherein the scanning head is positionally calibrated along x, y, z linear orthogonal axes within the localised work envelope.

3. The method of claim **1**, further comprising, before positionally calibrating the scanning head, positioning the scanning head by reference to a master theoretical model of the position of the first component and the position of the second component within the space envelope.

4. The method of claim **1**, wherein the scanning head is attached to a robotic arm having a first orientation for scanning profiles of the first component and the second component, and a second orientation for scanning the electrode tip.

5. The method of claim **1**, further comprising determining, from the cloud point data image of surfaces and edges to be welded, whether predetermined weld joint characteristics are satisfied, such that the welding of the first component to the second component is stopped in response to determining that the predetermined weld joint characteristics are not satisfied.

6. The method of claim **1**, wherein the scanning head includes a 3D optical visualiser.

7. The method of claim **1**, wherein the welding is tungsten inert gas (TIG) welding.

8. A computer control system programmed to control the scanning head and the robotic welding torch to perform the method of claim **1**.

9. An apparatus for welding the first component to the second component, the apparatus comprising:

the scanning head;
 the robotic welding torch; and
 the computer control system of claim **8**.

10. A non-transitory computer readable storage medium storing a computer program to be executed on a computer, causing the computer to control the scanning head and the robotic welding torch to perform the method of claim **1**.

11. An apparatus for welding a first component to a second component, the apparatus comprising:

a scanning head;
 a robotic welding torch; and
 a computer control system programmed to:
 positionally calibrate the scanning head within a localised work envelope, the work envelope being defined by boundaries surrounding the first component and the second component, the positional calibration being referenced to at least one datum feature within the work envelope;

control the scanning head to scan profiles of the first component and the second component within the work envelope using the calibrated scanning head; generate, from the scanned profiles, a cloud point data image of defined coordinate positions of surfaces and edges of the first component and the second component to be welded within a space envelope, the space envelope being larger than the work envelope, which is located inside the space envelope; control the scanning head to scan an electrode tip of the robotic welding torch to determine a defined coordinate position of the electrode tip within the space envelope, the electrode tip of the robotic welding torch being located outside of the work envelope at a time of scanning the electrode tip; and control the robotic welding torch to weld the first component to the second component, movement of the robotic welding torch being controlled by the control system using the cloud point data image and the defined coordinate position of the electrode tip, such that the electrode tip is held at a plurality of pre-determined stand-off positions around the first component and the second component within the work envelope during the welding.

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