Developing Design Tools for Biological and Biomedical Applications of Micro- and Nano-technology

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ABSTRACT

This short paper, an update of [75], is intended to provide a brief summary and extensive references on biological applications for micro- and nano-machining, as well as the computer-aided design challenges generated by those applications.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.6 [Computer-Aided Engineering]: Computer-Aided Design

General Terms

Design, Algorithms

Keywords

bioMEMS, lab-on-a-chip, CAD, Numerical Techniques

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognized that techniques developed for fabricating nanometer-sized semiconductor devices can be used to generate mechanical structures, a process referred to as micro- or nano-machining. Electrostatic forces are commonly used to manipulate these small structures because such forces are sufficiently large, owing to their quadratic scaling with inverse length, and because electrostatics is easily controlled electronically. Devices which combine small structures and electrostatic manipulation are often referred to as MEMS or NEMS, which are mnemonics for Micro(Nano)-Electro-Mechanical Systems. These mnemonics have become quite popular, and now MEMS and NEMS are used quite liberally to refer to a wide range of micro- and nano-machined devices that are not primarily electromechanical [1].

MEMS and NEMS can be combined to create single-chip systems that perform complicated procedures on micronand nanometer-sized objects, making the technology a natural candidate for processing biological cells, bacteria, and

CODES+ISSS'05, Sept. 19–21, 2005, Jersey City, New Jersey, USA.

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even larger proteins [2, 3, 4]. The potential of MEMS and NEMS in biological and biomedical applications inspired a subfield, often referred to as bioMEMS. The bioMEMS field is currently undergoing a dramatic expansion thanks in part to the very visable commercial success of microarrays for collecting gene expression data [6]; and the development of biologically-neutral rapidly micromachinable materials [5]. What has not kept pace is the development of the appropriate computer-aided design (CAD) tools.

The impact of inadequate CAD tools in micro- and nanotechnology is well-known. Researchers will not as aggressively examine the design space of a new idea, because they will have to rely on slow-to-construct physical prototypes. Product developers will struggle much longer to create manufacturable designs, because generating multiple physical prototypes is an extremely inefficient approach to determining design sensitivities. Even though there is consensus on the impact of inadequate CAD, the reason the situation has not changed is that bioMEMS design is so technologically diverse that new CAD strategies are needed. In this short paper, really an update of [75], the author is trying to point out both application and CAD literature that will help make clear some of the design tool challenges. Below, applications are mentioned first, to show the diversity of bioMEMS technology, followed by brief descriptions of some of the associated CAD issues.

2. APPLICATIONS

The biological applications of micro- and nano-machining fall into three broad overlapping categories: providing faster or extended experimental capabilities for researchers in molecular, cellular and system biology; improving detection capabilities either for medical diagnosis or biohazard applications; and developing implantable devices for managing chronic diseases [7, 8].

2.1 Research

In the area of biological research, one of the major successes of microtechnology is the microarray [6]. A microarray is a two-dimensional array of individually programmable patches that can be made to "light up" in response to gene expression levels. The two dimensional array then creates a characteristic picture which represents relative expression levels for many different genes. One important use of microarray data is to construct or calibrate network models for cellular signal transduction and regulation [9, 10, 11]. These networks are then used to gain insight into cell normal and disease responses, as well as to identify treatment targets.

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Microarrays are relatively straight-forward devices to design, because most of the cell processing is done externally. In order to accelerate that cell preparation, complicated microfluidic devices are being developed that can store arrays of cells and select them electronically [12], or lyse cells to release proteins for later detection [13]. In addition, new "living cell" devices are being developed which can yield single-cell time-series data, which can be much more informative than the single-timepoint, multicell-aggregate data provided by microarrays [14].

2.2 **Biomedical Applications**

In the area medical diagnosis, micro- and nano-machining offers the promise of rapid and inexpensive testing by creating a single device that is the equivalent of an entire diagnostic lab [15, 4, 16, 17]. Some labs-on-a-chip are essentially detectors; they combine mixers, reservoirs of reagents, separators, and reaction product sensors. Single-chip labs intended for processing cells are significantly more complicated; they may include techniques for screening and lysing the cells, preconcentrators or filters for resulting biomolecules, and specialized arrays of sensors [18].

There has been considerable success in designing and optimizing basic lab-on-a-chip components, and there are a variety of alternative designs for cell manipulators, mixers, separators, preconcentrators, filters and sensors. There has been less success in designing complete single-chip labs, in part because of the difficulty in modeling the entire complicated system.

Additional medical applications for micro- and nano-machining include DNA sequencing [19, 20, 21, 22, 23], cell separating and isolation [24, 12], and blood testing [25, 26].

2.3 Implantable Devices

Many of the implantable, or in-vivo, applications of micromachining are ones for which there is little or no treatment alternative. Such applications of micromachining are inspiring, and include approaches for continuous glocose monitoring [27], neural-stimulation [28], retinal implants [29], and artificial livers and other tissues [30, 31]. In-vivo micromachined devices are unlikely to appear in the near term, there are many difficult challenges such as the problems of energy havesting and developing biocompatible processing [32, 33, 34, 35].

3. CAD CHALLENGES

For surface-micro-machined polysilicon, a popular and relatively mature MEMS technology, existing design tools are reasonably complete. There are low-level simulation tools which, given either 3-D geometry or 2-D layout, can perform fast coupled 3-D electromechanical analysis of a single device. In addition, there are higher-level tools that extract more abstract models from 2-D layout and can be used for system simulation [36, 37, 38]. The situation is very different for bioMEMS. The tools are nowhere near as complete, primarily because the technology, and therefore the physical effects, are much more diverse. This diversity impacts strategies for low-level simulation as well as for model extraction. Finally, generating manufacturable designs in these new technologies have proved to be extremely difficult, suggesting that recent techniques in robust design might be important avenues to pursue [39].

3.1 Simulation

For many bioMEMS devices, the important physics can be reasonably accurately modeled using coupled continuum models. For example, many microfluidics devices can be simulated by coupling a Stokes equation model for the fluid, Poisson or Laplace's equation for the electrostatic fields, and the continuum elastostatics equation for mechanical deformation. For devices described by coupled continuum models, there are finite-element [40, 41] and volume-element [42] simulation tools which allow substantial flexibility in multiphysics simulation. When faster computational performance is needed for 3-D field simulation, Green's function independent fast solvers [43, 44, 46, 45] can be combined with finiteelement simulation using matrix-implicit multi-level Newton methods [47], though there is little available software.

Although some bioMEMS devices can be described by coupled PDE's and simulated using existing or emerging multiphysics simulators, many devices have more complicated physics. In devices intended for use in molecular separation, the length scales are such that noncontinuum fluid effects must be considered [48, 49, 50], and therefore hybrid approaches which combine molecular and continuum models are being developed [55, 56, 57, 58]. For devices used in processing cells, faster techniques are needed for analyzing cells in flow [51, 52, 53, 54]. For devices that perform droplet chemistry, methods are needed for rapid surface evolution [59].

4. MODEL EXTRACTION

The application of micromachining to systems which use bioMEMS, such as labs-on-a-chip, require complicated combinations of individual bioMEMS devices which process fluids, cells and molecules (e.g. mixers, separators and pumps). In order to simulate systems of these devices, models have been developed for common components, such as mixers and separators [60, 61]. The wide variety of devices currently in development, and the need to rapidly assess the impact of candidate device performance on system behavior, will accelerate the demand for techniques which more automatically extract models of these bioMEMS devices from detailed physical simulation. The required automatic techniques may include approaches similar to the robust nonlinear model order reduction strategies developed for classical MEMS and nonlinear circuits [62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68], but may also require new approaches where the interaction is a surface or region, rather than a few ports [69, 70, 71]. Finally, automated device optimization, particularly to improve robustness, will likely require some form of parameterized model reduction[72, 73, 74].

5. CONCLUSIONS

The field of micro- and nano-machining for biological applications has progressed considerably since the publication of [75], but the CAD tools have changed little. In the author's opinion, the lack of adequate CAD tools is the key reason for this field's near decade long delay between research prototype and commercial product. And since the technology is scaling ever downward, eventually delays in product development will halt research progress, because the delays will cascade. That is, without a previous generation's technology in useable form, it is unlikely that the next generation technological investigation can thoroughly begin. The author hopes that this brief paper will provide enough pointers to the literature to motivate students to contribute to CAD tool development and thereby help avoid technology stagnation.

This summary was supported by the Singapore-MIT Alliance, the National Science Foundation, Grants from the Semiconductor Research Corporation, the MARCO Interconnect Focus Center. In addition, much of the research described above was supported under a variety of DARPAsponsored programs.

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