

ometers are subject to unwanted drift. Both electronic reactor sensors are plagued by electrical noise induced by ionizing radiation near the reactor core.

A fiber optic sensor system was developed that is capable of tracking thermal neutron fluence and gamma flux in order to monitor nuclear reactor fission rates. The system provides near-real-time feedback from small-profile probes that are not sensitive to electromagnetic noise.

The key novel feature is the practical design of fiber optic radiation sensors. The use of an actinoid element to monitor neutron flux in fiber optic EFPI (extrinsic Fabry-Perot interferometric) sensors is a new use of material. The materials and structure used in the sensor construction can be adjusted to result in a sensor that is sensitive to just thermal, gamma, or neutron stimulus, or any combination of the three. The tested design showed low sensitivity to

thermal and gamma stimuli and high sensitivity to neutrons, with a fast response time.

This work was done by Clark D. Boyd of Luna Innovations, Inc. for Glenn Research Center.

Inquiries concerning rights for the commercial use of this invention should be addressed to NASA Glenn Research Center, Innovative Partnerships Office, Attn: Steven Fedor, Mail Stop 4-8, 21000 Brookpark Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44135. Refer to LEW-18701-1.

Compliant Tactile Sensors

Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas

Tactile sensors are currently being designed to sense interactions with human hands or pen-like interfaces. They are generally embedded in screens, keyboards, mousepads, and pushbuttons. However, they are not well fitted to sense interactions with all kinds of objects.

A novel sensor was originally designed to investigate robotics manipulation where not only the contact with an object needs to be detected, but also where the object needs to be held and manipulated. This tactile sensor has been designed with features that allow it to sense a large variety of objects in human environments.

The sensor is capable of detecting forces coming from any direction. As a result, this sensor delivers a force vector with three components. In contrast to most of the tactile sensors that are flat, this one sticks out from the surface so that it is likely to come in contact with

objects. The sensor conforms to the object with which it interacts. This augments the contact's surface, consequently reducing the stress applied to the object. This feature makes the sensor ideal for grabbing objects and other applications that require compliance with objects. The operational range of the sensor allows it to operate well with objects found in peoples' daily life. The fabrication of this sensor is simple and inexpensive because of its compact mechanical configuration and reduced electronics. These features are convenient for mass production of individual sensors as well as dense arrays.

The biologically inspired tactile sensor is sensitive to both normal and lateral forces, providing better feedback to the host robot about the object to be grabbed. It has a high sensitivity, enabling its use in manipulation fingers, which typically have low mechanical impedance in

order to be very compliant. The construction of the sensor is simple, using inexpensive technologies like silicon rubber molding and standard stock electronics.

This work was done by Eduardo R. Torres-Jara of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for Johnson Space Center. For further information, contact the JSC Innovation Partnerships Office at (281) 483-3809.

In accordance with Public Law 96-517, the contractor has elected to retain title to this invention. Inquiries concerning rights for its commercial use should be addressed to:

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Cytometer on a Chip

Analyses could be performed rapidly in compact instruments using disposable chips.

Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas

A cytometer now under development exploits spatial sorting of sampled cells on a microarray chip followed by use of grating-coupled surface-plasmon-resonance imaging (GCSPRI) to detect the sorted cells. This cytometer on a chip is a prototype of contemplated future miniature cytometers that would be suitable for rapidly identifying pathogens and other cells of interest in both field and laboratory applications and that would be attractive as alternatives to conventional flow cytometers.

The basic principle of operation of a conventional flow cytometer requires fluorescent labeling of sampled cells, stringent optical alignment of a laser beam with a narrow orifice, and flow of the cells through the orifice, which is subject to clogging. In contrast, the principle of operation of the present cytometer on a chip does not require fluorescent labeling of cells, stringent optical alignment, or flow through a narrow orifice. The basic principle of operation of

the cytometer on a chip also reduces the complexity, mass, and power of the associated laser and detection systems, relative to those needed in conventional flow cytometry.

Instead of making cells flow in single file through a narrow flow orifice for sequential interrogation as in conventional flow cytometry, a liquid containing suspended sampled cells is made to flow over the front surface of a microarray chip on which there are many cap-

ture spots. Each capture spot is coated with a thin (≈ 50 -nm) layer of gold that is, in turn, coated with antibodies that bind to cell-surface molecules characteristic of one the cell species of interest. The multiplicity of capture spots makes it possible to perform rapid, massively parallel analysis of a large cell population.

The binding of cells to each capture spot gives rise to a minute change in the index of refraction at the surface of the chip. This change in the index of refraction is what is sensed in GCSPRI, as described briefly below. The identities of the various species in a sample of cells is spatially encoded in the chip by the pattern of capture spots. The number of cells of a particular species is determined from the magnitude of the GCSPRI signal from that spot.

GCSPRI as used here can be summarized as follows: The cytometer chip is fabricated with a diffraction grating on its front surface. The chip is illuminated with a light emitting diode (LED) from the front. By proper choice of grating parameters and of the wavelength and

the angle of incidence of a laser beam, laser light can be made to be coupled into an electromagnetic mode that resonates with surface plasmons and thus couples light into surface plasmons. Coupling of light into a surface plasmon at a given location reduces the amount of incident light reflected from that location. A change in the index of refraction at the surface of a capture spot gives rise to a change in the resonance condition. Depending on the specific design, the change in the index of refraction could manifest itself as a brightening or darkening, a change in the wavelength needed to excite the plasmon at a given angle of incidence, or a change in the angle of incidence needed to excite the plasmon at a given wavelength.

Whereas a multiwavelength laser system with multichannel detection would be needed to detect multiple species in conventional flow cytometry, it suffices to use an LED and a single detector channel in the GCSPRI approach: this contributes significantly to reductions in cost, complexity, size, mass, and power. GCSPRI cytometer chips could

be made of plastic and could be mass-produced cheaply by use of molding and other methods adopted from the manufacture of digital video disks. These methods are amenable to a high degree of miniaturization: such additional features as fluidic channels, reaction chambers, and fluid-coupling ports could readily be incorporated into the chips, without incurring substantial additional costs.

This work was done by Salvador M. Fernandez of Ciencia, Inc., for Johnson Space Center. Further information is contained in a TSP (see page 1).

In accordance with Public Law 96-517, the contractor has elected to retain title to this invention. Inquiries concerning rights for its commercial use should be addressed to:

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