
MOBILE MICROROBOTICS

Intelligent Robotics and Autonomous Agents

Edited by Ronald C. Arkin

A complete list of the books in the Intelligent Robotics and Autonomous Agents series appears at the back of this book.

MOBILE MICROROBOTICS

Metin Sitti

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To the beautiful memories of my beloved sister, brain surgeon, İlkay Sitti
whom we lost so young and so unexpectedly

Acknowledgments

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I created and taught my first Micro/Nano-Robotics course at UC Berkeley in 2002 as a lecturer with 43 PhD and 2 undergraduate students. It was an amazing first-time teaching experience, and I continued teaching it at Carnegie Mellon University for 11 years as a professor. The content of the course evolved and changed each time, and this book represents its latest version with a focus on mobile microrobotics mainly. I hope it will help any professor who wants to teach such course or anybody who wants to learn about or start working on microrobotics.

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xiii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Definition of Different Size Scale Miniature Mobile Robots	1
1.2 Brief History of Microrobotics	6
1.3 Outline of the Book	8
2 Scaling Laws for Microrobots	13
2.1 Dynamic Similarity and Non-Dimensional Numbers	14
2.2 Scaling of Surface Area and Volume and Its Implications	17
2.3 Scaling of Mechanical, Electrical, Magnetic, and Fluidic Systems	18
2.4 Example Scaled-up Study of Small-Scale Locomotion Systems	21
2.5 Homework	24
3 Forces Acting on a Microrobot	27
3.1 Some Definitions	28
3.2 Surface Forces in Air and Vacuum	31
3.2.1 van der Waals forces	32
3.2.2 Capillary forces (surface tension)	35
3.2.3 Electrostatic forces	39
3.2.4 Comparison of general forces on micron scale	40
3.2.5 Specific interaction forces	40
3.2.6 Other geometries	42
3.3 Surface Forces in Liquids	43
3.3.1 van der Waals forces in liquids	43
3.3.2 Double-layer forces	43
3.3.3 Hydration (steric) forces	44
3.3.4 Hydrophobic forces	44
3.3.5 Summary	45
3.4 Adhesion	45
3.5 Elastic Contact Micro/Nanomechanics Models	46
3.5.1 Other contact geometries	51
3.5.2 Viscoelastic effects	53
3.6 Friction and Wear	54
3.6.1 Sliding friction	54
3.6.2 Rolling friction	55
3.6.3 Spinning friction	57

	3.6.4	Wear	57
	3.7	Microfluidics	58
	3.7.1	Viscous drag	59
	3.7.2	Drag torque	60
	3.7.3	Wall effects	60
	3.8	Measurement Techniques for Microscale Force Parameters	61
	3.9	Thermal Properties	64
	3.10	Determinism versus Stochasticity	65
	3.11	Homework	65
4		Microrobot Fabrication	69
	4.1	Two-Photon Stereo Lithography	71
	4.2	Wafer-Level Processes	75
	4.3	Pattern Transfer	76
	4.4	Surface Functionalization	79
	4.5	Precision Microassembly	80
	4.6	Self-Assembly	80
	4.7	Biocompatibility and Biodegradability	81
	4.8	Neutral Buoyancy	82
	4.9	Homework	83
5		Sensors for Microrobots	85
	5.1	Miniature Cameras	86
	5.2	Microscale Sensing Principles	88
	5.2.1	Capacitive sensing	88
	5.2.2	Piezoresistive sensing	89
	5.2.3	Optical sensing	92
	5.2.4	Magnetoelastic remote sensing	93
6		On-Board Actuation Methods for Microrobots	97
	6.1	Piezoelectric Actuation	97
	6.1.1	Unimorph piezo actuators	101
	6.1.2	Case study: Flapping wings-based small-scale flying robot actuation	103
	6.1.3	Bimorph piezo actuators	107
	6.1.4	Piezo film actuators	108
	6.1.5	Polymer piezo actuators	109

6.1.6	Piezo fiber composite actuators	109
6.1.7	Impact drive mechanism using piezo actuators	109
6.1.8	Ultrasonic piezo motors	110
6.1.9	Piezoelectric materials as sensors	110
6.2	Shape Memory Materials-Based Actuation	111
6.3	Polymer Actuators	113
6.3.1	Conductive polymer actuators (CPAs)	114
6.3.2	Ionic polymer-metal composite (IPMC) actuators	114
6.3.3	Dielectric elastomer actuators (DEAs)	115
6.4	MEMS Microactuators	116
6.5	Magneto- and Electrorheological Fluid Actuators	118
6.6	Others	119
6.7	Summary	120
6.8	Homework	120
7	Actuation Methods for Self-Propelled Microrobots	123
7.1	Self-Generated Gradients or Fields-Based Microactuation	123
7.1.1	Self-electrophoretic propulsion	123
7.1.2	Self-diffusiophoretic propulsion	126
7.1.3	Self-generated microbubbles-based propulsion	128
7.1.4	Self-acoustophoretic propulsion	129
7.1.5	Self-thermophoretic propulsion	130
7.1.6	Self-generated Marangoni flows-based propulsion	130
7.1.7	Others	132
7.2	Bio-Hybrid Cell-Based Microactuation	132
7.2.1	Biological cells as actuators	133
7.2.2	Integration of cells with artificial components	137
7.2.3	Control methods	138
7.2.4	Case study: Bacteria-driven microswimmers	139
7.3	Homework	148
8	Remote Microrobot Actuation	151
8.1	Magnetic Actuation	151
8.1.1	Magnetic field safety	154
8.1.2	Magnetic field creation	155
8.1.3	Special coil configurations	157
8.1.4	Non-uniform field setups	157

	8.1.5	Driving electronics	158
	8.1.6	Fields applied by permanent magnets	159
	8.1.7	Magnetic actuation by a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) system	160
	8.1.8	6-DOF magnetic actuation	161
	8.2	Electrostatic Actuation	162
	8.3	Optical Actuation	164
	8.3.1	Opto-thermomechanical microactuation	164
	8.3.2	Opto-thermocapillary microactuation	164
	8.4	Electrocapillary Actuation	165
	8.5	Ultrasonic Actuation	166
	8.6	Homework	167
9		Microrobot Powering	169
	9.1	Required Power for Locomotion	170
	9.2	On-Board Energy Storage	171
	9.2.1	Microbatteries	171
	9.2.2	Microscale fuel cells	172
	9.2.3	Supercapacitors	174
	9.2.4	Nuclear (radioactive) micropower sources	174
	9.2.5	Elastic strain energy	175
	9.3	Wireless (Remote) Power Delivery	175
	9.3.1	Wireless power transfer by radio frequency (RF) fields and microwaves	175
	9.3.2	Optical power beaming	176
	9.4	Energy Harvesting	176
	9.4.1	Solar cells harvesting incident light	177
	9.4.2	Fuel or ATP in the robot operation medium	177
	9.4.3	Microbatteries powered by an acidic medium	177
	9.4.4	Mechanical vibration harvesting	178
	9.4.5	Temperature gradient harvesting	179
	9.4.6	Others	179
	9.5	Homework	180
10		Microrobot Locomotion	181
	10.1	Solid Surface Locomotion	182
	10.1.1	Pulling- or pushing-based surface locomotion	182

10.1.2	Bio-inspired two-anchor crawling	184
10.1.3	Stick-slip-based surface crawling	185
10.1.4	Rolling	185
10.1.5	Microrobot surface locomotion examples	186
10.2	Swimming Locomotion in 3D	195
10.2.1	Pulling-based swimming	196
10.2.2	Flagellated or undulation-based bio-inspired swimming	197
10.2.3	Chemical propulsion-based swimming	198
10.2.4	Electrochemical and electroosmotic propulsion-based swimming	199
10.3	Water Surface Locomotion	199
10.3.1	Statics: Staying on fluid-air interface	200
10.3.2	Dynamic locomotion on fluid-air interface	202
10.4	Flight	204
10.5	Homework	206
11	Microrobot Localization and Control	209
11.1	Microrobot Localization	209
11.1.1	Optical tracking	209
11.1.2	Magnetic tracking	209
11.1.3	X-ray tracking	210
11.1.4	Ultrasound tracking	211
11.2	Control, Vision, Planning, and Learning	211
11.3	Multi-Robot Control	214
11.3.1	Addressing through localized trapping	214
11.3.2	Addressing through heterogeneous robot designs	215
11.3.3	Addressing through selective magnetic disabling	218
11.4	Homework	222
12	Microrobot Applications	225
12.1	Micropart Manipulation	225
12.1.1	Contact-based mechanical pushing manipulation	225
12.1.2	Capillary forces-based contact manipulation	226
12.1.3	Non-contact fluidic manipulation	227
12.1.4	Autonomous manipulation	232
12.1.5	Bio-object manipulation	232
12.1.6	Team manipulation	234

12.1.7	Microfactories	234
12.2	Health Care	235
12.3	Environmental Remediation	236
12.4	Reconfigurable Microrobots	236
12.5	Scientific Tools	240
13	Summary and Open Challenges	241
13.1	Status Summary	241
13.2	What Next?	241
	Bibliography	245
	Index	269

List of Figures

- 1.1 Diagram showing the benefits, challenges, and potential applications of mobile microrobots. 4
- 1.2 A conceptual sketch of an example future mobile microrobot with spatio-selective surface functionalization for potential medical applications. Each functional component could be assembled on a main body. The main body further could serve as a large depot for therapeutics to launch controlled release at the site of action. A closed-loop autonomous locomotion (e.g., a bio-hybrid design) could couple environmental signals to motility. Targeting units could enable reaching and localization at the intended body site. Medical imaging, e.g., magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), contrast agents loaded on the microrobot could enable visualization as well as remote steering on demand. Metallic nanorods could enable remote plasmonic or RF heating to decompose a tumor tissue by hypothermia. 5
- 1.3 Approximate timeline showing the emerging new microrobot systems with their given overall size scale as significant milestones. (a) Implantable tiny permanent magnet steered by external electromagnetic coils [1]. (b) Screw-type surgical millirobot [2]. (c) Bacteria-driven bio-hybrid microrobots [3]. (d) Self-electrophoretic catalytic microswimmer [4]. (e) Bio-hybrid magnetic undulating microswimmer [5]. (f) Glucose-fueled catalytic microswimmer [6]. (g) Magnetically controlled bacteria [7]. (h) MEMS electrostatic microrobot [8]. (i) Thermal laser-driven microrobot [9]. (j) Magnetic bead driven by an MRI device in pig artery [10]. (k) Magnetic microswimmer with rigid helical flagellum inspired by bacterial flagella [11, 12]. (l) Crawling magnetic microrobot [13]. (m) Microtubular catalytic jet microrobot [14]. (n) Bacteria swarms as microrobotic manipulation systems [15]. (o) 3D magnetic microrobot control [16]. (p) Self-thermophoretic microswimmer [17]. (q) Bubble microrobot [18]. (r) Light-sail microrobot [19]. (s) Self-acoustophoretically propelled microrobot [20]. (t) Sperm-driven bio-hybrid microrobot [21]. (u) Magnetic, chemotactic, and pH-tactic control of bacteria-driven microswimmers [22–24]. (v) Magnetic soft undulating swimmer [25]. (x) Untethered pick-and-place microgripper [26]. (y) Cell-laden microgel assembling microrobot [27]. (z) Catalytic micro-motors driven by enzymatic reactions [28]. (aa) In vivo navigation of

- microswimmers [29, 30]. (bb) 6-degrees-of-freedom (6-DOF) actuation of magnetic microrobots [31]. 6
- 1.4 Some existing remote (off-board) approaches to mobile microrobot actuation and control in 2D. (a) Magnetically driven crawling robots include the Mag- μ Bot [13], the Mag-Mite magnetic crawling microrobot [32], the magnetic microtransporter [33], the rolling magnetic microrobot [34], the diamagnetically levitating milliscale robot [35], the self-assembled surface swimmer [36], and the magnetic thin-film microrobot [37]. (b) Thermally driven microrobots include the laser-activated crawling microrobot [9], the micro-light sailboat [19], and the optically controlled bubble microrobot [18]. (c) Electrically driven microrobots include the electrostatic scratch-drive microrobot [38] and the electrostatic microbiorobot [39]. Other microrobots which operate in 2D include the piezoelectric-magnetic microrobot MagPieR [40] and the electrowetting droplet microrobot [41]. 8
- 1.5 (a) Chemically propelled designs include microtubular jet microrobots [14], catalytic micro/nanomotors [42], and electro-osmotic microswimmers [43]. (b) Swimming microrobots include the colloidal magnetic swimmer [5], the magnetic thin-film helical swimmer [44], the microscale magnetic helix fabricated by glancing angle deposition [12], the helical microrobot with cargo carrying cage fabricated by direct laser writing [45], and the helical microrobot with magnetic head fabricated as thin-film and rolled using residual stress [46]. (c) Microrobots pulled in 3D using magnetic field gradients include the nickel microrobot capable of 5-DOF motion in 3D using the OctoMag system [16] and the MRI-powered and imaged magnetic bead [47]. (d) Cell-actuated bio-hybrid approaches include the artificially magnetotactic bacteria [48], the cardiomyocyte-driven microswimmers [49], the chemotactic steering of bacteria-propelled microbeads [24], the sperm-driven and magnetically steered microrobots [21], and the magnetotactic bacteria swarm manipulating microscale bricks [15]. 9
- 2.1 Left image: Transmission electron microscope image of a multi-flagellated *E. coli* bacterium with around 0.5- μ m diameter and 2- μ m length. Copyright © Dennis Kunkel Microscopy, Inc. Right image: Photograph of an example scaled-up multiple bacterial helical flagella setup for measuring the thrust force produced by multiple flagella as a function

- of flagella geometry and distance. A planetary gear system was used to guarantee individual rotation of each flagella at identical rates. Reprinted from [50] with the permission of AIP Publishing. 23
- 3.1 Schematics of surface tension forces acting at the liquid-solid-vapor interface, which result in a thermodynamic equilibrium contact angle θ_c on a solid surface in a given vapor such as air. 29
 - 3.2 Schematics of liquid droplet wetting on structured surfaces: (a) Cassie regime where the liquid droplet does not fully wet the micro/nanostructure and there is air trapped under droplet, and (b) Wenzel regime where the droplet fully wets the micro/nanostructure. 31
 - 3.3 Short- or long-range, contact or non-contact, and attractive or repulsive surface forces, such as van der Waals, electrostatic, and capillary forces, create a sticky world for a microrobot interacting with other surfaces or objects in a given medium. 32
 - 3.4 Schematics of parameters during a capillary force between a spherical microrobot asperity and a flat, smooth substrate due to the liquid bridge between two surfaces in air. 37
 - 3.5 Schematics of electrowetting of a conductive liquid droplet on a flat, smooth dielectric film. 38
 - 3.6 Comparison of weight and adhesive forces for a gold sphere in close 0.2 nm contact with a gold surface. The surfaces are assumed atomically smooth gold, with a Hamaker constant of 400 zJ for gold. The medium is assumed as air, with a relative permittivity of 1. The sphere was assumed to be made from gold ($\rho = 19,300 \text{ kg/m}^3$) for the weight calculation, and to have a voltage of 100 V for the electrostatic calculation in an air environment. For the capillary force, $\gamma = 0.0728 \text{ N/m}$ is chosen for water with $\theta_c = 85^\circ$ for water contact angle on gold. 41
 - 3.7 Pressure (stress) profiles for (a) Hertz, (b) JKR, (c) DMT, and (d) MD elastic contact mechanics models, where compressive (positive sign) external normal load stress and tensile (negative sign) adhesive stress create small deformation on a spherical object in contact with a flat plane. 48
 - 3.8 Contact geometry of a sphere deforming on a flat plane by (a) Hertz, JKR, and DMT models; and (b) MD elastic contact mechanics model for an applied external load of L and attractive surface forces increasing the

- contact deformation differently depends on the contact model. The MD theory models the periphery of the sphere-plane interface as a crack. 49
- 3.9 Side-view sketch of a sphere rolling on a plane due to an applied rolling moment M_r . Top view of the approximated shape of the rolling contact for a sphere on a plane. 56
- 3.10 Schematic of an example custom force measurement setup to characterize adhesion and friction at the micron scale for mN scale interaction forces: A - load cell, B - (spherical, circular flat punch, etc.) indenter, C - flat surface, D - microscope objective, E - two-axis manual linear stage, F - two axis manual goniometer, G - motorized linear stage, H - light source. 62
- 3.11 A possible force-distance curve between a smooth glass hemisphere loaded to and unloaded from a smooth, flat substrate. Two surfaces start approaching to contact from point A. Long-range attractive forces could attract the hemisphere with a maximum attractive force at point B. Two surfaces contact each other at point C when the distance reaches the interatomic distance a_0 . The interface would deform elastically during compressive loading until reaching a predetermined load L at point D. An attractive (negative) maximum tensile force (i.e., pull-off force P_{po}) occurs at point E. Two surfaces separate from each other at point F. 63
- 3.12 (a) Single polymer fiber with a spherical tip adheres to a flat glass substrate (left image), and (b) two polymer fiber spherical tips are in contact (right image). 66
- 4.1 Scanning electron microscope (SEM) image of an example (a) magnetic microrobot fabricated by laser micromachining from a bulk NdFeB sheet to achieve strong magnetization properties, and (b) polymeric microrobot (coated with a magnetic Cobalt nanofilm) 3D-printed by a two-photon lithography system to trap a microbubble on the hole on the upper side of the cubic robot body for picking and placing small parts using capillary forces inside fluids. Scale bars are 200 μm . 70
- 4.2 An example 3D microrobot design fabricated by two-photon lithography. (a) Each component can be selectively addressed by the two-photon laser pulse, thereby allowing for selective functionalization via light chemistry. The catalytic engine wall is selectively patterned with platinum nanoparticle groups that produce gas microbubbles inside the engine.

- The microbubbles leave the robot through the nozzle, inducing a thrust that propels the microrobot forward. (b) Section view of the catalytic microrobot shows its components in a 3D CAD drawing. (c) SEM micrograph of an example microrobot fabricated from a biocompatible polymer, polyethylene glycol diacrylate. 74
- 4.3 Replica molding process based on photolithography used to fabricate a large number of magnetic microrobots. From top left to bottom right, process steps are: deposit an SU-8 photoresist on a silicon wafer; pattern the SU-8 layer using UV lithography; replicate the SU-8 pattern's negative using a silicone rubber mold; mold the rubber mold with a liquid polymer mixed with magnetic microparticles and use a punch to remove the excess polymer mix from the mold; after curing the polymer, demold the microrobots. This process allows for the creation of arbitrary 2D-shaped polymer composite microrobots from micron to mm scale. 75
- 4.4 Fabrication and magnetization process for two magnetic microrobots with an integrated compliant flexural gripper [26]. Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (a) A magnetic slurry consisting of magnetic microparticles and polymer binding matrix is poured into the negative mold. (b) Microgripper shapes are pulled from the mold using tweezers. (c) Torque-based designs are spread open prior to magnetization, to allow each gripper tip to be magnetized in an opposite direction. The bend direction shown results in a normally closed gripper. Force-based microgrippers are molded from two magnetic materials, in two separate molding batches. The pieces are fixed together using UV-curable epoxy with a rubber mold as a fixture to hold the parts precisely. These force-based gripper tips are magnetized in one common direction. (d) After relaxation, the grippers are shown in their final magnetic configurations. (e) Fabricated designs are shown in the relaxed state after magnetization and assembly. 77
- 4.5 Fabrication, magnetization, and actuation processes of a swimming-sheet magnetic soft microrobot. Reprinted from [25] with the permission of AIP Publishing. (a) A flat sheet fabricated from permanent magnetic microparticles and Ecoflex silicone rubber is (b) bent into a circle and subject to a 1.0 T uniform magnetic field. (c) When the field is removed and the elastic robot body is straightened, it is left with a magnetization

- that varies along its length, which (d) causes it to be deformed when subject to a weak external field. Rotating the external field continuously in time causes the sheet deformations to travel down its length, providing a propulsive force in fluid. 78
- 4.6 Scanning electron microscope images of self-folded untethered micro-grippers from 2D patterns using directed self-assembly. Reprinted from [51]. All rights reserved. 81
- 5.1 Conceptual drawing of a microrobot capable of sensing and interacting with entities within its environment. In this example, the microrobot could be capable of detecting chemicals through the use of chemical sensors and could be able to transmit these data wirelessly. A microrobot may also have a manipulator to actively control objects in its environment. 86
- 5.2 Schematic of a possible sensing scheme used for detecting changes in natural frequency for a magnetoelastic sensor (MES). An electromagnetic pulse can be sent using the drive coil, causing the magnetoelastic sensing element to oscillate. This oscillation would create a decaying electromagnetic signal, which could be picked up by the sensing coils. The electromagnetic response could be analyzed to determine the amplitude and resonant frequency of response. 94
- 6.1 Basic directions in a 3D anisotropic polycrystalline piezo ceramics. 99
- 6.2 (a) Axial (left image) and (b) transversal (right image) type piezo actuation. 100
- 6.3 Basic cantilevered rectangular-shaped piezoelectric unimorph actuator design for small-scale actuation. 102
- 6.4 Fixing the PZT-5H piezo layer dimensions and applied voltage, the elastic layer's thickness h_s can be tuned to maximize the displacement or mechanical energy output of the unimorph actuator. 104
- 6.5 Linear dynamic model (bottom image) of a flapping wing design (upper image) with a piezo actuator, lossless transmission, and wing. 105
- 6.6 Serial and parallel type bimorph piezo actuators, where the two active piezo layers are bonded to each other with the given poling directions (the arrow in each piezo layer) and electrical connections. The

- upper layer expands and the lower layer contracts for enhanced bending motion. 108
- 6.7 Dielectric elastomer actuator contracts vertically and expands laterally when high voltage is applied at its compliant electrodes. 115
- 6.8 Side-view sketches of two thermal microactuator designs: (a) One-layer metal cantilever beam bends when heated because each beam arm heats up and expands differently due to their significantly different geometry and electrical resistance. (b) Bi-layer cantilever beam consists of two layers with significantly different coefficients of thermal expansion. 117
- 6.9 Top-view (above) and side-view (bottom) drawings of an electrostatic comb-drive microactuator design with N fingers. 118
- 6.10 Basic operation modes of MRF and ERF actuator designs: (a) flow, (b) shear, and (c) compression modes. 119
- 7.1 Self-electrophoresis, where E is the electric field and H^+ and e^- show the direction of flow of ions and the electric field, respectively. 124
- 7.2 Self-diffusiophoresis, ∇C , the concentration gradient, inducing the pressure gradient ∇P to propel the microrobot body. 127
- 7.3 Main components of a bio-hybrid microrobot [52]. Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. These microrobotic systems integrate biological cells with artificial substrates to provide actuation and sensing functionalities. 134
- 7.4 Stochastic swimming motion behavior of *S. marcescens* and a *S. marcescens*-propelled microswimmer [52]. Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (a) A free-swimming bacterial cell alternates between run states, where it travels in a straight line (red arrows), and tumble states, where it tumbles and reorients in 3D space (blue dots). (b) Experimentally measured 3D swimming trajectory of a free-swimming bacterial cell (*S. marcescens*). (c) Propulsive forces and torques generated by a single bacterium attached to a microbead. (d) Representative 3D helical trajectory of a *S. marcescens*-propelled microbead, which was obtained experimentally [53]. 140
- 7.5 Control strategies for a bacteria-propelled microswimmer [52]. Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Experimental time-lapse images are shown on the

- right for microswimmers in (a) an isotropic environment resulting in stochastic motion; (b) a linear chemoattractant (L-aspartate) gradient, which is sensed by the bacteria, leading to a biased random walk; and (c) an applied uniform magnetic field of 10 mT resulting in directed motion. The bacteria are attached to a superparamagnetic microbead in (c) and to polystyrene microbeads in (a) and (b). The red and blue lines indicate the trajectories of the microswimmers. Different microswimmer samples are shown for each environmental condition. Scale bars: 20 μm . 142
- 7.6 Free-body diagram of the swimming bio-hybrid microrobot, where \vec{F} and \vec{T} are the instantaneous total bacteria propulsion force and torque, \vec{f} and $\vec{\tau}$ are the hydrodynamic translational and rotational drag on the bead, and \vec{v} and $\vec{\omega}$ are the bead translational and rotational velocity vectors, respectively. 146
- 7.7 Sample 2D stochastic trajectories of bacteria-propelled beads with 5 μm diameter from (a) experiments (reprinted from [53] with the permission of AIP Publishing), and (b) simulations based on the computational stochastic bead motion model in Eqs. [??-??] for single and multiple (up to 15) attached *S. marcescens* bacteria. 147
- 8.1 An example eight-coil system capable of applying 5-DOF magnetic force and torque in a several-cm-sized workspace with an uniform magnetic field. This system is capable of applying fields of strength 25 mT and field gradients up to 1 T/m using optional iron cores. A: Top camera. B: Side camera. C: Magnetic coils. D: Workspace. 159
- 8.2 An example non-uniform magnetization profile to achieve 6-DOF magnetic actuation [31]. Copyright © 2015 by SAGE Publications, Ltd. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd. Here, the robot has a net magnetization \vec{m}_e along its local z -axis, and the magnetization vectors (solid vectors) are always pointing away from the origin. When a spatial gradient $\partial B_y/\partial x$ is applied, the induced forces on the magnetization vectors, indicated by the dotted vectors, exert torque around the z -axis of the robot body. 162
- 9.1 Basic operation schematic of a conventional fuel cell. 173

- 10.1 Top-view picture of an example 500 μm star-shaped Mag- μBot pushing a plastic peg into a gap in a 2D planar assembly task. The arena width is 4 mm. 188
- 10.2 Schematic of a rectangular magnetic microrobot with applied external forces and torques. Here, the typical dimensions are several hundred microns on a side, and the microrobot is made from a mixture of NdFeB magnetic powder and a polyurethane binder. The magnetization vector is denoted by \vec{M} . The external forces include the magnetic force and torque F , T , the fluid damping force and torque L and D , the friction force f , the adhesion force F_{adh} , the weight mg , and the normal force N . 190
- 10.3 Example comparison of experimental and simulation microrobot speed values using stick-slip motion on a flat silicon surface [13]. Copyright © 2009 by SAGE Publications, Ltd. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd. Average microrobot speeds are given for operation in two different operating environments: air and water. Error bars denote standard deviation in experimental results. 191
- 10.4 Mag- μBot force scaling from the case study. Equivalent forces are computed from torques by dividing by the microrobot size. The fluid environment is assumed as water with viscosity $\mu = 8.9 \times 10^{-4}$ Pa·s, and the microrobot density is 5,500 kg/m³. The microrobot velocity is 1 mm/s, and its rotation rate is taken as swinging through an angle of 40° at a rate of 50 Hz, or about 70 rad/s. The magnetic field is taken as 6 mT and the field gradient as 112 mT/m, with a microrobot magnetization of 50 kA/m. To calculate surface friction, the interfacial shear strength is taken as one-third the shear strength, as $\tau = 20$ MPa, and the contact area is varying with load as given in Section ???. The gap size for adhesion calculation is taken as 0.2 nm. The coefficient of friction μ_f is taken as 0.41. The work of adhesion W_{132} is calculated in water for the polyurethane and silicon surfaces and is found to be negative, indicating repulsion. This material pairing was chosen specifically to yield this negative value. This results in a steep drop in the friction force when the microrobot weight overcomes this repulsive force at a microrobot size of about 7 mm. In a model with non-smooth surfaces, the friction would be positive at smaller scales. 193
- 10.5 Microscale swimming methods. (a) Rotation of a stiff helix inspired by bundled flagella of swimming *E. coli* bacteria. (b) Traveling wave through an elastic tail or body inspired by spermatozooids. 196

- 10.6 Side-view sketch of a cylindrical microrobot body with fluid contact angle θ_c staying on a fluid-air interface in equilibrium. V_b is the volume under water due to buoyancy, and V_{st} is the volume under water due to surface tension F_{cap} . 201
- 10.7 Numerically estimated maximum lift forces for different fluid contact angles (θ_c) of an example robot body with the cylindrical geometry shown in the inset image, showing that the robot body should be hydrophobic to have high surface tension-based lift forces [54]. Copyright © 2007 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. 202
- 10.8 Example milliscale mobile robots that walk on water inspired by water strider insects: (a) a 0.65-gr tethered water walking robot with four water-repellent supporting legs and two driving legs actuated by three unimorph piezos at resonance (left photo), and (b) a 22-gr water walking robot with 12 water-repellent circular concentric feet and two driving feet actuated by two tiny DC motors (right photo). 204
- 11.1 Components of feedback control of a general microrobotic system. 212
- 11.2 Conceptual sketch of a multi-robot control system, where a large number of magnetic microrobots could be remotely actuated and controlled or self-propelled autonomously to achieve a variety of tasks inside the human body or other operation environments [55]. Copyright © 2015 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. Here, such a microrobotic swarm could be addressed and controlled individually, as teams, or as an ensemble. 213
- 11.3 Robot velocity versus electrostatic anchoring voltage for a microrobot on a 6- μm -thick SU-8 layer. Reprinted from [56] with the permission of AIP Publishing. A critical voltage of 700 V is required to affix the microrobot. Videos of the motion were recorded and analyzed to determine velocities. A pulsing frequency of 20 Hz was used for translation. 216
- 11.4 Experimental velocity responses of two Mag- μBots with varying aspect ratios but similar values of effective magnetization [45,67]. The maximum field strength was held at 1.1 mT. Data points are mean values, and error bars represent standard deviations for 10 trials. 217

- 11.5 H - m hysteresis loops of microrobot magnetic materials, taken in an AGFM for applied field up to 1,110 kA/m shows distinct material coercivity values. The magnetization is normalized by the saturation magnetization M_s of each sample. 219
- 11.6 Schematic showing the multiple magnetic states, which can be achieved through the use of a variety of magnetic materials [57]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. (a) Three separate magnetic actuators, each made from a different magnetic material, the magnetization of which can be independently addressed by applying magnetic field pulses of various strengths. Here, H_{pulse} is a large field pulse and H_{small} is a small static field. (b) A single magnetic composite actuator can be switched between the “up,” “off,” or “down” states by applying pulses of different strength, where H_{large} is a large field pulse. 221
- 11.7 Addressable microrobot teamwork task, requiring the cooperative contribution of two mobile microrobots of different sizes working together to reach a goal [57]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. Frames show two superimposed frames, with the microrobot paths traced and midpoints outlined. (a) Both microrobots lie inside an enclosed area. The door to the goal is blocked by a plastic blockage. Only the larger microrobot can move the blockage, while only the smaller microrobot is small enough to fit through the door. (b) The larger microrobot is enabled and moved to remove the blockage while the smaller disabled microrobot remains in place. The larger microrobot is returned to its starting point and disabled. (c) The smaller microrobot is enabled and is free to move through the door to the goal. 222
- 12.1 (a) A teleoperated star-shaped microrobot and a 210- μm microsphere for side-pushing under liquid on a glass surface [58]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. (b) The microrobot moves past the microsphere from its side, causing the sphere to displace a small amount of D_s , primarily due to the fluid interactions. Arrow on microrobot indicates direction of its motion. 227
- 12.2 Simulation and experiment of a star-shaped microrobot manipulating a 210- μm microsphere from the side [58]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. Vertical division indicates whether sphere contact occurs with the microrobot’s edge, determined from the simulation. The simulation fit “Sim Fit” is from the dynamic simulation,

- while “Sim Fit Lin” is a linear approximation to this fit, which can be used for control using these results. 228
- 12.3 A side-view slice of the finite element modeling (FEM) solution for the flow around a star-shaped microrobot as it traverses through the environment [58]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. The microrobot is moving toward the left in these images, and the flow velocities correspond to y -directed flow, depicted by arrows. Half the microrobot is modeled in this analysis. 229
- 12.4 Team non-contact manipulation by three microrobots simultaneously spinning [59]. Copyright © 2012 by IEEE. Reprinted by permission of IEEE. The microrobot positions are trapped at discrete locations by magnetic docks embedded in the surface. Manipulated microsphere paths are tracked by colored lines. 230
- 12.5 Trapping and translating live cells or other microorganisms by a spinning and rolling magnetic spherical microrobot [60]. Reproduced with the permission of the Royal Society of Chemistry. (a) The simulation result of a 5- μm diameter spherical microrobot spinning at 100 Hz on a flat surface in water. The plot is from a top view of the cross-section taken at the equatorial plane of the microrobot. Red concentric circles represent the streamlines. The color map shows the flow velocity distribution. (b) The schematic of the trapping of a nearby bacterium by the rotational flow induced by the rotation ω of the robot near a flat surface. Any bacterium that is far away is minimally affected by the induced flow. A bacterium that is close enough to the spinning particle is first reoriented by the flow to align its body’s long axis with the local streamline (i). Then it is trapped (ii) and orbited around the particle. (c) The schematic of the mechanism for enabling the mobility of the induced rotational flow field. Instead of being perpendicular to the surface as shown in (b), the rotation axis of the particle is tilted from the z -axis. (d) The finite element simulation result of a 5- μm diameter spherical microrobot rotating at 100 Hz with a tilt angle of 75 degrees and a translational speed of $0.06\omega_r a$ in the $-y$ direction on a flat surface in water. The plot is from a top view of the cross-section taken at the equatorial plane of the robot. The arrows indicate the in-plane flow velocity at selective positions, while the color map shows the distribution of the out-of-plane flow velocity normalized by the magnitude of the in-plane flow velocity at the same position. 231

- 12.6 Microgel blocks with embedded live cells have been assembled using a magnetically driven microrobot on a planar surface in physiological fluids [27]. Copyright © 2014 by Nature Publishing Group. Reprinted by permission of Nature Publishing Group. Fluorescence images of NIH 3T3 cell-encapsulating hydrogels after the assembly of (a) T-shape, (b) square-shape, (c) L-shape, and (d) rod-shape constructs. Green represents live cells and red represents dead cells. (e-g) Immunocytochemistry of proliferating cells stained with Ki67 (red), DAPI (blue), and Phalloidin (green) at day 4. (e) Cells stained with DAPI and Phalloidin at 20× magnification. (f) Cells stained with Ki67 and Phalloidin at 20× magnification. (g) Cells stained with Ki67, DAPI, and Phalloidin at 40× magnification. (h-q) 2D and 3D heterogeneous assemblies of HUVEC, 3T3, and cardiomyocyte-encapsulating hydrogels. HUVECs, 3T3s, and cardiomyocytes are stained with Alexa 488 (green), DAPI (blue), and Propidium iodide (red), respectively. (h) Bright field and (i) fluorescence images of an assembly composed of circular and triangular gels. (j-o) Fluorescence images of several 2D heterogeneous assemblies of HUVEC, 3T3, and cardiomyocyte-encapsulating hydrogels. (p) Schematic form and (q) fluorescence image of 3D heterogeneous assembly of HUVEC, 3T3, and cardiomyocyte-encapsulating hydrogels. Scale bars are 500 μm unless otherwise is stated. 233
- 12.7 Frames from a movie with four teleoperated Mag- μMods assembling into a reconfigurable structure [61]. Copyright © 2011 by SAGE Publications, Ltd. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd. Arrows indicate direction of magnetization. (a) Four Mag- μMods prepare for assembly. (b) All four modules are assembled in a T-configuration. (c) One module is broken free by rotation and reattaches in a new configuration. (d) The new assembly is mobile, and is shown moving to a new location. 239

List of Tables

1.1	Definition of different size scale miniature mobile robots (Reynolds number is the ratio of inertial forces to viscous forces, which dictates the fluid dynamics regime.)	3
2.1	Scaling of different forces dependent on length (perimeter), surface area, and volume	18
2.2	Approximate isomorphic scaling relations and factors of different physical parameters	22
3.1	Typical energies, basis of attractions, and examples of intramolecular (bonding) and intermolecular (non-bonding) interactions	28
3.2	Surface tension (liquids) and energy (solids) and water contact angle in air for some common materials used in microrobotics	30
3.3	Hamaker constant for several common materials in vacuum, from [62] unless otherwise noted ($1 \text{ zJ} = 10^{-21} \text{ J}$)	34
3.4	Micro/nanoscale elastic contact and adhesion (pull-off force) models for an atomically smooth spherical microrobot asperity in contact with an atomically smooth flat substrate	51
3.5	Properties of materials commonly encountered in microrobotics studies	52
4.1	Features of different microfabrication techniques to fabricate microrobots or their components	71
4.2	List of potential probes, targets, and binding methods for the chemical functionalization of a microrobot sensor surface	79
4.3	Densities of common materials in microrobotics studies at 25°C for synthetic fluids and body temperature for biological fluids	83
6.1	Physical properties of a hard PZT, optimized for higher force and lower strain applications, ceramic actuator material (PZT-5A) ($\epsilon_0 = 8.854 \times 10^{-12} \text{ F/m}$)	99
6.2	PZT-5H, PZN-PT, and steel layer properties	102
6.3	Selected flying robot unimorph actuator design parameters for different T and h_s values and unimorph piezo types	107

6.4	Comparison of on-board microactuators, driven electrically (high: ●●●; medium: ●●; low: ●; CD: MEMS comb-drive actuator)	120
7.1	Main advantages and disadvantages of common control methods for bio-hybrid microactuators [52]	137
7.2	Average swimming speeds and cargo-to-cell size ratios of cell-actuated microswimmers (blps: body length per second; PS: polystyrene) [52]	139
8.1	Typical magnetic material hysteresis characteristics. The first materials are referred to as magnetically “hard”, while the last ones are “soft”, and possess low remanence and coercivity	152
8.2	Units and conversions for magnetic properties [63] (to get SI units from CGS, multiply by the conversion factor)	154
9.1	Maximum power required to move several mobile microrobots from the literature with their given actuation method, size, maximum speed, and estimated required maximum force to move	171
9.2	Possible on-board energy storage methods with their estimated nominal energy densities (ATP: adenosine triphosphate)	172
10.1	Approximate force magnitudes encountered in the magnetic microrobot stick-slip walking case study. Torques are treated as a pair of equivalent forces at opposite ends of the microrobot. For these comparisons, we assume a microrobot approximately 200 μm on a side with magnetization 50 kA/m, operating in a water environment on glass at a speed of tens of body-lengths per second in an applied field several mT in strength. Torques are treated as a pair of equivalent forces on opposite ends of the microrobot.	192
11.1	Magnetic material hysteresis characteristics [64] (^a : measured in an alternating gradient force magnetometer (AGFM) after grinding)	220

Significant progress in micro/nanoscale science and technology in last two decades has created increasing demand and hope for new microsystems for high-impact applications in healthcare, biotechnology, manufacturing, and mobile sensor networks. Such microsystems should be able to access small enclosed spaces such as inside the human body and microfluidic devices non-invasively and manipulate or interact with micro/nanoscale entities directly. Because human or macroscale robot sensing, precision, and size are not capable of achieving such desired characteristics, microrobotics has emerged as a new robotics field to extend our interaction and exploration capabilities to sub-millimeter scales. Moreover, mobile microrobots could be manufactured cost-effectively in large numbers, where a dense network of microrobots could enable new massively parallel, self-organizing, reconfigurable, swarm, or distributed systems. For these purposes, many groups have proposed various untethered mobile microrobotic systems in the past decade. Such untethered microrobots could enable many new applications, such as minimally invasive diagnosis and treatment inside the human body, biological studies or bioengineering applications inside microfluidic devices, desktop micromanufacturing, and mobile sensor networks for environmental and health monitoring.

1.1 Definition of Different Size Scale Miniature Mobile Robots

A typical macroscale mobile robot is a self-contained, untethered, and reprogrammable machine that can perceive, move, and learn in a given environment to realize a given task. But when can a mobile robot be called a mobile microrobot? Unfortunately, there is not yet a standardized definition of the term *microrobot*. Let us attempt to create a definition to classify different miniature robots in the literature. First, let us define two unique characteristics of a mobile microrobot [65]:

- *Overall size*: A mobile microrobot must be able to access small (less than 1 mm in all dimensions) spaces directly with minimal invasion, which entails untethered operation and all dimensions of the mobile robot being smaller than 1 mm.
- *Scaling effects on robot mechanics*: Locomotion mechanics and physical interactions of a mobile microrobot in a given environment are dominated by microscale physical forces and effects. Thus, volume-based forces such

as inertial forces, gravity, and buoyancy become almost negligible or comparable to surface area- and perimeter-based forces such as viscous forces, drag, friction, surface tension, and adhesion.

To incorporate these unique characteristics, we will define a mobile micro-robot as *a mobile robotic system where its untethered mobile component has all dimensions less than 1 mm and larger than 1 μm and its mechanics is dominated by microscale physical forces and effects*. Thus, for microrobots, bulk forces are negligible or comparable to surface area- and perimeter-related forces. Also, viscous forces are much larger than inertial forces for a swimming microrobot, resulting in Reynolds number, which is the ratio of the inertial to viscous forces, less than 1. At the micron scale, fluid flows are mostly steady, and we are mostly in the Stokes flow regime. Brownian (stochastic) motion of microrobots in water resulting from their random collision with the water molecules at room temperature is negligible. Moreover, microrobots are made of sub-millimeter scale components, such as microactuators, microsensors, and micromechanisms, and are fabricated by microfabrication methods, which are different from conventional macroscale machining techniques. Finally, they have specific functions for a given task such as manipulation, sensing, cargo transport and delivery, and local heating.

There are currently two main approaches to designing, building, and controlling mobile microrobots in the literature depending on the given application:

- *On-board approach*: Similar to a typical macroscale mobile robot, the microrobot is self-contained and untethered, with all robot dimensions being less than 1 mm. Here, all on-board robot components, such as mechanisms, tools, actuators, sensors, power source, electronics, computation, and wireless communication, must be miniaturized down to few micrometers scale.
- *Off-board approach*: The mobile, untethered component of the microrobotic system is remotely (off-board) actuated, sensed, controlled, or powered and has all dimensions less than 1 mm while the overall system size could be very large.

The on-board approach is technically much more difficult to realize due to miniaturization challenges of all on-board components. However, it enables mobile microrobots navigating in large workspaces, e.g., in outdoors, which is required for mobile sensor network applications for environment monitoring and exploration. On the other hand, the off-board approach is easier to

Table 1.1

Definition of different size scale miniature mobile robots (Reynolds number is the ratio of inertial forces to viscous forces, which dictates the fluid dynamics regime.)

Mobile Robot Type	Overall Size	Dominant Forces Acting on Robot
Millirobots	1 mm to 10 cm	Macroscale volume-related forces; Reynolds number $\gg 1$
Microrobots	1 μm to 1 mm	Microscale surface area- or perimeter-related forces; Negligible Brownian motion; Reynolds number ~ 1 or $\ll 1$
Nanorobots	$< 1 \mu\text{m}$	Nanoscale physical and chemical forces; Non-negligible stochastic Brownian motion

implement due to fewer miniaturization challenges when operating in confined workspaces, such as the human body and microfluidic chips. Such limited workspace would not be an issue for potential microrobot applications in healthcare, bioengineering, microfluidics, and desktop micromanufacturing. Thus, almost all of the current mobile microrobotics studies in the literature have been using the off-board approach, and therefore our microrobotics definition also covers such studies.

In addition to the above on-board and off-board approaches, microrobots can also be classified as *synthetic* and *bio-hybrid*. In the former case, the microrobot is made of fully synthetic materials, such as polymers, magnetic materials, silicon, silicon oxide, metal alloys, composites, elastomers, and metals, while the latter is made of both biological and synthetic materials. Bio-hybrid microrobots are typically integrated with single or many cells, such as cardiac or skeletal muscle cells, or microorganisms, such as bacteria, algae, spermatozooids, and protozoa, and powered by the chemical energy inside the cell or in the environment. They harvest the efficient and robust propulsion, sensing, and control capabilities of biological cells at the microscale. Such cells could propel the robot in a given physiologically compatible environment, and sense environmental stimuli to control the robot motion by diverse mechanisms, such as chemotaxis, magnetotaxis, galvanotaxis, phototaxis, thermotaxis, and aerotaxis.

Reported miniature mobile robot sizes range from sub-micron to centimeter scale. We can classify such different length scale miniature robots as *millirobots*, *microrobots*, and *nanorobots* as given in Table 1.1. These small-scale robots have different dominant physical forces and effects. For the on-board approach case, their on-board components must have overall sizes much

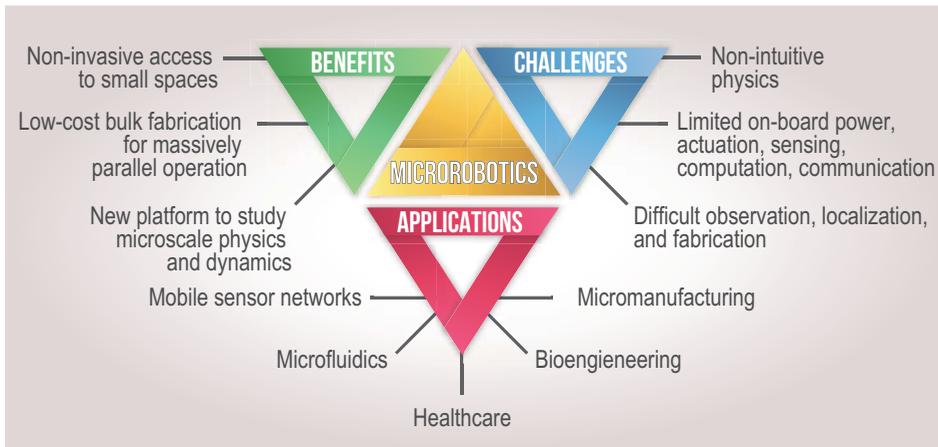


Figure 1.1

Diagram showing the benefits, challenges, and potential applications of mobile microrobots.

smaller than the given robot overall size. For millirobots, macroscale forces such as bulk forces dominate the robot mechanics instead of microscale forces and effects. The fluid dynamics is unsteady and even starts to be periodically turbulent when the Reynolds number is much larger than 1. For nanorobots, assumptions of continuum mechanics may not be valid at the sub-micron scale, and effects such as Brownian motion and chemical interactions create highly stochastic robot behavior. The fluid dynamics for nanorobots are no longer described accurately by the Navier-Stokes equation, so the Reynolds number is not relevant.

The size scale range in Table 1.1 presents significant new challenges in fabrication, actuation, locomotion mechanisms, and power supply not seen in macroscale mobile robotics. Microscale robots are particularly interesting because new physical principles begin to dominate the robot behavior. Changes in fluid mechanics, stochastic motions, and shorter time scales also challenge natural engineering notions as to how robotic elements move and interact. These physical effects must be taken into account when designing and operating robots at the small scale.

The benefits, challenges, and potential applications of mobile microrobots are overviewed in Figure 1.1. Here, we see that microrobots promise to access small spaces in a non-invasive manner as a new platform for microscale physics and dynamics. Compared with other robotic systems, they can be fabricated

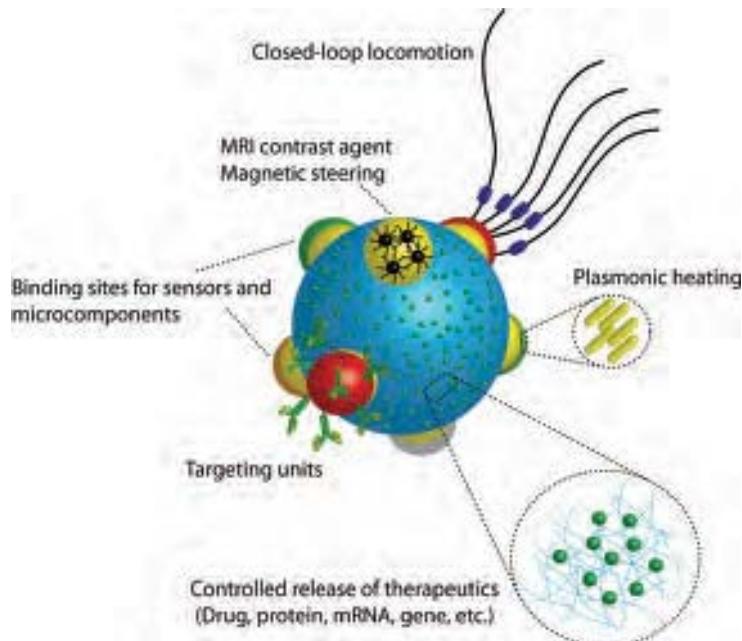


Figure 1.2

A conceptual sketch of an example future mobile microrobot with spatio-selective surface functionalization for potential medical applications. Each functional component could be assembled on a main body. The main body further could serve as a large depot for therapeutics to launch controlled release at the site of action. A closed-loop autonomous locomotion (e.g., a bio-hybrid design) could couple environmental signals to motility. Targeting units could enable reaching and localization at the intended body site. Medical imaging, e.g., magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), contrast agents loaded on the microrobot could enable visualization as well as remote steering on demand. Metallic nanorods could enable remote plasmonic or RF heating to decompose a tumor tissue by hyperthermia.

inexpensively in bulk for potential massively parallel applications. However, several challenges arise in the design and control of microscale robots, such as non-intuitive attractive/repulsive and contact/non-contact physical forces, limited options for power and actuation, significant fabrication constraints, and difficulty in localizing such tiny robots. The field of microrobotics is particularly exciting due to the potential applications in healthcare, bioengineering, microfluidics, mobile sensor networks, and desktop microfactories. A conceptual sketch of an example mobile microrobot for medical applications is shown in Figure 1.2 with its possible components and functions.

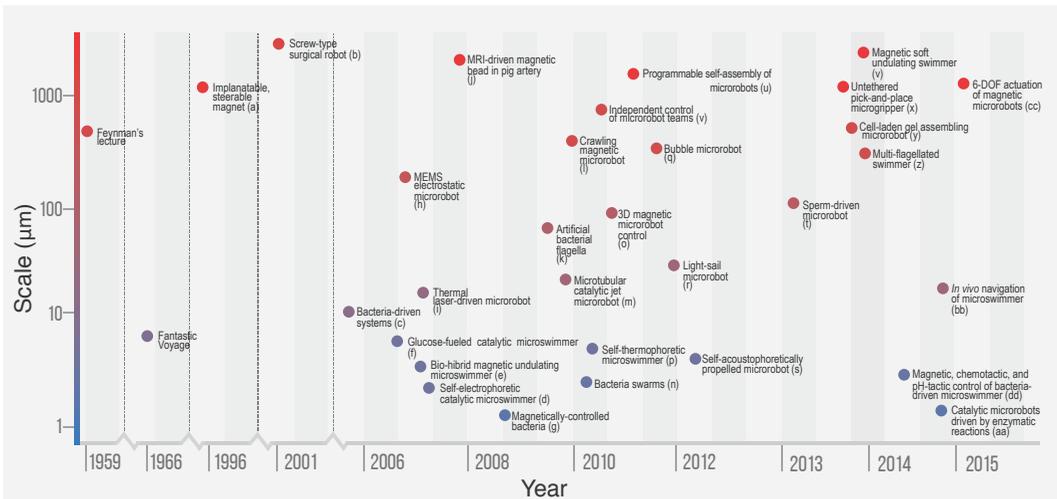


Figure 1.3

Approximate timeline showing the emerging new microrobot systems with their given overall size scale as significant milestones. (a) Implantable tiny permanent magnet steered by external electromagnetic coils [1]. (b) Screw-type surgical millirobot [2]. (c) Bacteria-driven bio-hybrid microrobots [3]. (d) Self-electrophoretic catalytic microswimmer [4]. (e) Bio-hybrid magnetic undulating microswimmer [5]. (f) Glucose-fueled catalytic microswimmer [6]. (g) Magnetically controlled bacteria [7]. (h) MEMS electrostatic microrobot [8]. (i) Thermal laser-driven microrobot [9]. (j) Magnetic bead driven by an MRI device in pig artery [10]. (k) Magnetic microswimmer with rigid helical flagellum inspired by bacterial flagella [11, 12]. (l) Crawling magnetic microrobot [13]. (m) Microtubular catalytic jet microrobot [14]. (n) Bacteria swarms as microrobotic manipulation systems [15]. (o) 3D magnetic microrobot control [16]. (p) Self-thermophoretic microswimmer [17]. (q) Bubble microrobot [18]. (r) Light-sail microrobot [19]. (s) Self-acoustophoretically propelled microrobot [20]. (t) Sperm-driven bio-hybrid microrobot [21]. (u) Magnetic, chemotactic, and pH-tactic control of bacteria-driven microswimmers [22–24]. (v) Magnetic soft undulating swimmer [25]. (x) Untethered pick-and-place microgripper [26]. (y) Cell-laden microgel assembling microrobot [27]. (z) Catalytic micromotors driven by enzymatic reactions [28]. (aa) In vivo navigation of microswimmers [29, 30]. (bb) 6-degrees-of-freedom (6-DOF) actuation of magnetic microrobots [31].

1.2 Brief History of Microrobotics

Advances in and increased use of microelectromechanical systems (MEMS) since the 1990s have driven the development of untethered microrobots. MEMS fabrication methods allow for precise features to be made from a wide range of materials, which can be useful for functionalized microrobots. There has been a surge in microrobotics work in the past few years, and the field is relatively new and growing fast [55, 66–68]. Figure 1.3 presents an overview of

a few of the new microrobotic technologies which have been published, along with their approximate overall size scale.

The first miniature machines were conceived by Feynman in his lecture on “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom” in 1959. In popular culture, the field of microrobotics is familiar to many due to the 1966 sci-fi movie *Fantastic Voyage*, and later the 1987 movie *Innerspace*. In these films, miniaturized submarine crews are injected inside the human body and perform non-invasive surgery. The first studies in untethered robots using principles which would develop into microrobot actuation principles were only made recently, such as a magnetic stereotaxis system [1] to guide a tiny permanent magnet inside the human body and a magnetically driven screw which moved through tissue [2]. Other significant milestone studies in untethered microrobotics include a study on bacteria-inspired swimming propulsion [69], bacteria-propelled beads [3, 70], steerable electrostatic crawling microrobots [8], laser-powered microwalkers [9], magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) device-driven magnetic beads [10], and magnetically driven milliscale nickel robots [71]. These first studies have been followed by other novel actuation methods, such as helical propulsion [11, 12], stick-slip crawling microrobots [13], magnetotactic bacteria swarms as microrobots [72], optically driven “bubble” microrobots [18], and microrobots driven directly by the transfer of momentum from a directed laser spot [19], among others. Figures 1.4 and 1.5 show a number of the existing approaches to microrobot mobility in the literature for motion in two dimensions and three dimensions. Most of these methods belong to the off-board (remote) microrobot actuation and control approach, and will be discussed in detail later. It is immediately clear that actual microrobots do not resemble the devices shrunk down in popular microrobotics depictions.

As an additional driving force for the development of mobile microrobots, the Mobile Microrobotics Competition began in 2007 as the “nanogram” league of the popular Robocup robot soccer competition [73]. This yearly event has since moved to the IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation and challenges teams to accomplish various mobility and manipulation tasks with an untethered microrobot smaller than 500 μm on a side. The competition has spurred several research groups to begin research in microrobotics, and has helped define the challenges most pressing to the microrobotics research field.

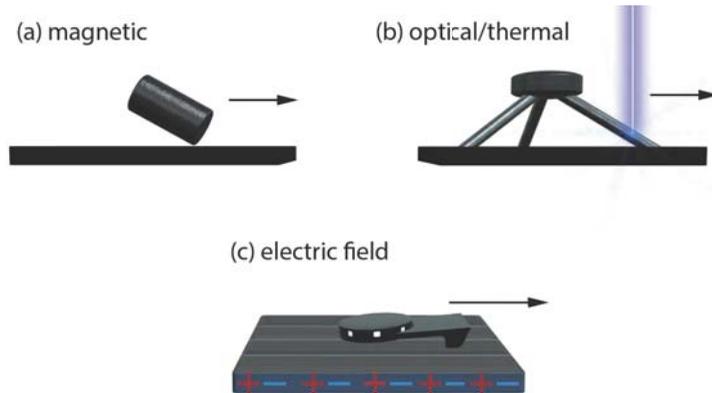


Figure 1.4

Some existing remote (off-board) approaches to mobile microrobot actuation and control in 2D. (a) Magnetically driven crawling robots include the Mag- μ Bot [13], the Mag-Mite magnetic crawling microrobot [32], the magnetic microtransporter [33], the rolling magnetic microrobot [34], the diamagnetically levitating milliscale robot [35], the self-assembled surface swimmer [36], and the magnetic thin-film microrobot [37]. (b) Thermally driven microrobots include the laser-activated crawling microrobot [9], the micro-light sailboat [19], and the optically controlled bubble microrobot [18]. (c) Electrically driven microrobots include the electrostatic scratch-drive microrobot [38] and the electrostatic microbiorobot [39]. Other microrobots which operate in 2D include the piezoelectric-magnetic microrobot MagPieR [40] and the electrowetting droplet microrobot [41].

1.3 Outline of the Book

This book introduces the reader to the newly emerging robotics field of mobile microrobotics. Chapter 2 covers the scaling laws that can be used to determine the dominant forces and effects at the micron scale. Such laws would also give us a significant physical intuition when we design and analyze different microrobots. Moreover, such scaling laws can be used to design and build scaled-up robots to understand the design and control principles for micro-robotic systems, which are much harder to study experimentally at the micron scale directly.

In Chapter 3, forces acting on microrobots such as surface forces, adhesion, friction, and viscous drag are given and analytically modeled for simple spherical microrobot and flat surface interaction cases. Significant surface forces in air are typically van der Waals, capillary, and electrostatic forces for microsystems. In liquids, van der Waals forces still exist, but many other surface forces

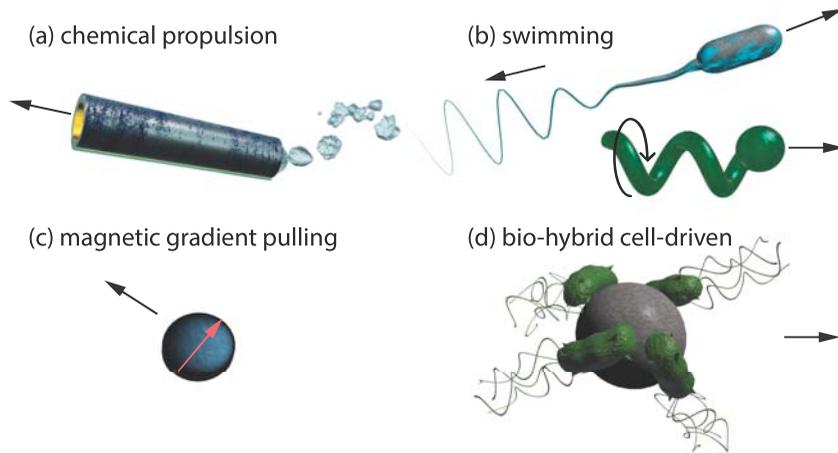


Figure 1.5

(a) Chemically propelled designs include microtubular jet microrobots [14], catalytic micro/nanomotors [42], and electro-osmotic microswimmers [43]. (b) Swimming microrobots include the colloidal magnetic swimmer [5], the magnetic thin-film helical swimmer [44], the microscale magnetic helix fabricated by glancing angle deposition [12], the helical microrobot with cargo carrying cage fabricated by direct laser writing [45], and the helical microrobot with magnetic head fabricated as thin-film and rolled using residual stress [46]. (c) Microrobots pulled in 3D using magnetic field gradients include the nickel microrobot capable of 5-DOF motion in 3D using the OctoMag system [16] and the MRI-powered and imaged magnetic bead [47]. (d) Cell-actuated bio-hybrid approaches include the artificially magnetotactic bacteria [48], the cardiomyocyte-driven microswimmers [49], the chemotactic steering of bacteria-propelled microbeads [24], the sperm-driven and magnetically steered microrobots [21], and the magnetotactic bacteria swarm manipulating microscale bricks [15].

(such as double layer, hydration, and hydrophobic forces) also become important. When the microrobot contacts surfaces or other robots, surface forces induce adhesion, which is function of interfacial physical properties, contact geometry, and load. For elastic and viscoelastic materials, such adhesive forces and surface deformation are modeled using micro/nanoscale contact mechanics models. When the robot moves and inserts shear force on another solid surface it is in contact with, micro/nanoscale friction becomes crucial to model and understand. Sliding, rolling, and spinning types of frictional forces are modeled approximately. Inside fluids, microfluidic forces such as viscous drag and drag torque are important to model while having possible wall effects (i.e.,

changes in fluidic flows and forces due to the nearby walls) in the given operation environment. Finally, measurement techniques that can be used to characterize such micron scale force parameters are described so that the force models could use real empirical parameter values towards realistic robot behavior prediction.

Chapter 4 describes possible microfabrication techniques for microrobots, which are photo-lithography, bulk micromachining, surface micromachining, LIGA process, deep-reactive ion etching, laser micromachining, two-photon lithography, electro-discharge machining, micromilling, and so on. Each method's capabilities and limitations are studied so that the proper microfabrication method for a given microrobot design can be determined optimally. Especially, two-photon lithography is a recent exciting fabrication tool that could create a wide range of complex 3D microrobots with specific surface patterning and functionalization.

Chapter 5 includes possible on-board and remote sensing methods for microrobots. Tiny cameras and piezoresistive, capacitive, and piezoelectric microsensors could be potentially integrated to microrobots with proper size reduction, signal conditioning, and powering. However, such on-board sensors are not available for sub-mm scale robots, but remote magnetoelastic and optical sensing methods are more feasible for microrobots at the moment.

Microrobots can be actuated using on-board microactuators, self-propelled using physical or chemical interactions with their operation medium or biological cells attached to them, or remotely actuated. Chapter 6 studies possible on-board microactuators such as piezoelectric, shape memory alloy, conductive polymer, ionic polymer-metal composite, dielectric elastomer, MEMS electrostatic or thermal, and magneto- and electrorheological fluid actuators. Some of these actuators can be scaled down to micron scale as thin-film or unimorph/bimorph bending-type actuators integrated to robot structures directly while their on-board driving, control, and powering are still challenging for sub-mm scale robots. Chapter 7 describes self-propulsion methods that can use self-generated local gradients and fields or biological cells as the actuation source in proper liquid environments. Such catalytic (e.g., self-electrophoretic, self-diffusiophoretic, self-generated microbubbles-based, self-acoustophoretic, self-thermophoretic, and self-generated Marangoni flows based propulsion) or biological (bacteria, muscle cell, and algae-driven microswimmers) actuation approaches do not require any on-board electrical power source, electronics, processor, and control circuitry, which make

them promising for mobile microrobots down to few microns and even sub-micron scale. Such self-propelling microswimmers are all stochastic and can be controlled by tactic stimuli in the environment. Chapter 8 covers the commonly used remote microrobot actuation methods. Remotely generated physical forces and torques can be used to actuate microrobots operating in a limited workspace, such as inside the human body or a microfluidic device. Main remote actuation methods based on magnetic, electrostatic, optical, and ultrasonic forces or pressures are explained. These actuation methods are currently the most common untethered mobile microrobot actuation method in addition to catalytic microswimming methods.

All current mobile microrobots have no on-board powering capability, therefore they are typically actuated remotely or self-propelled by the fuels in the operation environment with no on-board functions such as sensing, processing, communication, and computing yet. Only in the specific case of some bio-hybrid microrobot designs, the chemical energy inside the cells can power the biomotors and thus the locomotion of microswimmers. Such on-board functions are indispensable for future medical and other microrobot applications with more advanced capabilities. Therefore, Chapter 9 covers the possible on-board powering methods for microrobots: we can integrate an on-board energy/power source, transfer power wirelessly, and scavenge power from the operation environment.

Chapter 10 includes the typical locomotion methods for microrobots on surfaces, in liquids, in air, and on fluid-air interfaces. Microrobots can have many different locomotion modes, such as surface locomotion in 2D (crawling, rolling, sliding, walking, and jumping), swimming in 3D (flagellar propulsion, pulling, chemical propulsion, body/tail undulation, jet propulsion, and floating), locomotion at the air-fluid interface in 2D (walking, jumping, climbing, sliding, and floating), and flying in the air in 2D or 3D (flapping wings, rotary wings, and levitated near-surface motion). We study each locomotion mode with its given physical conditions, possible actuation methods, power consumption, and challenges. We also give example relevant biological counterparts for each locomotion mode.

In Chapter 11, microrobot localization and control methods are studied. Determining the location of untethered microrobots in a space is a major challenge, depending on the operational environment. Optical, magnetic (electromagnetic and MRI-based), x-ray, and ultrasound tracking methods are described with their given resolution, speed, penetration depth, and potential health and technical issues. Next, control, vision, planning, and learning issues

for microrobots are briefly described. Controlling teams/swarms of microrobots is a significant challenge for future applications, and various multi-robot control methods are studied for the case of magnetic microrobots especially.

Potential current and future applications of microrobots are covered in Chapter 12. Biological and synthetic micropart manipulation using contact and non-contact methods, healthcare, environment remediation, microfactory, reconfigurable microsystems, and scientific tool applications are described with given challenges.

Chapter 13 summarizes and describes the key near-future challenges to solve in the microrobotics field.

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Index

- Adhesion, 45
- ATP, 133, 177
- Autonomous, 232, 243

- Bacteria, 139
- Bimorph piezo actuators, 108
- Bio-hybrid actuators, 132
- Bio-object manipulation, 232
- Biocompatibility, 81, 243
- Biodegradability, 81, 243
- Biomedical microrobots, 5, 235, 244
- Bipolar electrochemistry, 132
- Bond number, 17, 200
- Brownian motion, 65
- Bulk micromachining, 69
- Bulk shear modulus, 55
- Burgers vector, 55

- Capacitive sensing, 88
- Capillary forces, 36, 200, 226
- Capillary number, 17
- Capillary waves, 203
- Casimir forces, 41
- Catalytic micromotors, 125
- CCD image sensors, 87
- Chemotaxis, 139
- CMOS image sensors, 87
- Coefficient of friction, 54
- Coercivity, 152, 218
- Collective, 244
- Communication, 243
- Conductive polymers, 114
- Contact micromanipulation, 225
- Control, 211
- Cost of transport, 182

- Debye length, 44
- Derjaguin approximations, 42
- Dielectric elastomer actuators, 115
- DLVO theory, 44
- DMT theory, 49
- Dominik and Tielens model, 55
- Double-layer forces, 43
- Drag torque, 60
- DRIE, 69

- E. coli, 135
- EDM, 70
- Elastic contact micro/nanomechanics, 47
- Elastic strain energy, 175
- Electroactive polymer actuators, 113
- Electroactive polymers, 113
- Electrocapillary actuation, 165
- Electroosmotic propulsion, 199
- Electroplating, 75

- Electrorheological fluid actuators, 118
- Electrostatic actuation, 162
- Electrostatic forces, 39
- Electrowetting, 38
- Energy harvesting, 176
- Environmental remediation, 236

- Fantastic Voyage, 7
- Feynman, 7
- Flagellar propulsion, 197
- Flight, 204
- Flying robots, 103
- Force-distance curve, 63
- Friction, 54
- Froude number, 16, 182

- Hamaker constant, 33, 43
- Hard magnets, 153
- Health-care applications, 235
- Helmholtz coils, 157
- Hertz theory, 47
- Hydration forces, 44
- Hydrogen bonding, 41
- Hydrophobic forces, 44
- Hysteresis, 218

- Impact drive mechanism, 109
- Indenter, 64
- Inductive power transfer, 176
- Interfacial shear strength, 54
- Ionic polymer-metal composite actuators, 114

- JKR theory, 49
- Joule heating, 113

- Kahn-Richardson drag force, 59

- Laser micromachining, 70
- Learning, 211, 243
- Lennard-Jones potential, 35, 49
- LIGA, 69
- Lippmann-Young equation, 38
- Liquid contact angle, 36
- Liquid surface tension, 36
- Localization, 209, 242

- Magnetic actuation, 151
- Magnetic field safety, 154
- Magnetic levitation, 226
- Magnetic tracking, 209
- Magnetoelastic sensing, 93
- Magnetorheological fluid actuators, 118
- Marangoni flows, 165
- Marangoni forces, 131

- Maxwell coils, 157
- MD theory, 49
- Mechanical vibration harvesting, 178
- MEMS microactuators, 116
- Micro fuel cells, 172
- Microactuators, 97, 119
- Microassembly, 80
- Microbatteries, 171, 177
- Microbubbles-based propulsion, 128
- Microcantilever, 92
- Microcantilevers, 80
- Microcrawlers, 186, 192
- Microfabrication, 69
- Microfactories, 234
- Microfluidics, 58
- Microgrippers, 133
- Micromanipulation, 225
- Micromilling, 71
- Microorganisms, 135
- Micropumps, 133
- Microsensors, 86
- Microswimmers, 73, 125, 133, 145, 170, 195
- Microwalkers, 133
- Microwaves, 175
- Millirobots, 4, 97
- Molding, 76
- MRI, 7, 160, 210
- Multi-robot addressing, 214
- Multi-robot control, 214, 242
- Muscle-based actuators, 136

- Nanorobots, 4
- Navier-Stokes equation, 58
- Neutral buoyancy, 82
- Non-contact micromanipulation, 227
- Non-polar molecules, 32
- Non-uniform magnetic fields, 157
- Nuclear (radioactive) micropower, 174

- Optical actuation, 164
- Optical lithography, 70
- Optical power transfer, 176
- Optical sensing, 92
- Optical tracking, 209
- Opto-thermal actuation, 164
- Opto-thermocapillary actuation, 164

- Péclet number, 17, 65
- Paramagnetic materials, 153
- Percoll, 82
- Permanent magnets, 159
- Photothermal heating, 113
- Piezo fiber, 109
- Piezo film, 108
- Piezoelectric actuators, 97
- Piezoelectric sensing, 110
- Piezoresistive sensing, 89
- Planning, 211
- Poisson distribution, 145
- Polymer actuators, 113
- Polymer piezo, 109
- Power consumption, 170
- Powering, 169
- Programmable matter, 237
- Pull-off force, 49, 63
- Pulling locomotion, 182
- PVDF, 109
- PZT, 98

- Random walk, 144
- Reconfigurable, 236
- Remanence, 152
- Reynolds number, 15, 59, 183, 195, 203, 204
- RF power transfer, 175
- Rolling, 185
- Rolling friction, 55
- Rolling locomotion, 230
- Rotational diffusion, 144

- S. marcescens*, 141
- Self-acoustophoresis, 130
- Self-assembly, 80
- Self-diffusiophoresis, 126
- Self-electrophoresis, 125
- Self-organization, 244
- Self-propulsion, 123, 198
- Self-thermophoresis, 130
- Shape memory alloys, 111
- Sliding friction, 54
- Smart composite manufacturing, 70
- Soft actuators, 116
- Soft lithography, 76
- Soft magnets, 153
- Spermatozooids, 195
- Spinning friction, 57
- Stick-slip, 185, 187
- Stokes flow, 59, 192
- Strouhal number, 16, 204
- Supercapacitors, 174
- Surface functionalization, 79
- Surface micromachining, 69
- Surface tension, 36
- Swarm, 244

- Tabor parameter, 50
- Team manipulation, 234
- Thermal expansion, 64
- Thermocapillary effect, 165
- Translational diffusion, 144

- Two-anchor crawling, 184
- Two-photon stereo lithography, 71

- Ultrasonic actuation, 130, 166
- Ultrasonic motors, 110
- Ultrasound tracking, 211
- Undulation-based propulsion, 197
- Unimorph piezo actuators, 101

- van der Waals forces, 32, 43, 238
- Viscoelastic effects, 53
- Viscous drag, 59, 170, 195, 228

- Wall effects, 60
- Water striders, 200
- Water surface locomotion, 199
- Wear, 54, 57
- Weber number, 16
- Wireless power delivery, 175
- Work of adhesion, 46

- X-ray tracking, 210

- Young-Laplace equation, 36, 201

- Zeta potential, 44

Intelligent Robotics and Autonomous Agents

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