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TECHNIQUES FOR INTEGRATED PREHEATING AND COATING OF POWDER MATERIAL IN ADDITIVE FABRICATION AND RELATED SYSTEMS AND METHODS

Abstract

Techniques for improved efficiency of sintering in additive fabrication are described. According to some aspects, mechanisms for depositing and leveling source material are combined with a mechanism for heating the material. In some embodiments, one or more heating elements may be arranged to lead and/or follow a material deposition mechanism such that heat may be applied to the build region in concert with deposition of material. As a result of this technique, the heating and depositing steps may be performed closer together in time and/or heat may be applied more directly to the material than in conventional systems. As a result, greater control over material temperature may be achieved, thereby avoiding excess temperature exposure and subsequent undesirable changes to the material.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS [0001] The present application claims the benefit as a continuation under 35 U.S.C. § 120 of U.S. application Ser. No. 16/163,391, filed Oct. 17, 2018, which claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. § 119 (e) of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 62/575,024, filed Oct. 20, 2017, each of which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Additive fabrication, e.g., 3-dimensional (3D) printing, provides techniques for fabricating objects (also referred to as “parts”) by causing portions of a building material to solidify at specific locations. Additive fabrication techniques may include stereolithography, selective or fused deposition modeling, direct composite manufacturing, laminated object manufacturing, selective phase area deposition, multi-phase jet solidification, ballistic particle manufacturing, particle deposition, selective laser sintering or combinations thereof. Many additive fabrication techniques build parts by forming successive layers, which are typically cross-sections of the desired object. Typically each layer is formed such that it adheres to either a previously formed layer or a substrate upon which the object is built.

[0003] In one approach to additive fabrication, known as selective laser sintering, or “SLS,” solid objects are created by successively forming thin layers by selectively fusing together powdered material. One illustrative description of selective laser sintering may be found in U.S. Pat. No. 4,863,538, incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

SUMMARY

[0004] According to some aspects, an additive fabrication device configured to produce three-dimensional objects by sintering a source material is provided, the device comprising a material deposition mechanism, a fabrication bed configured to receive source material from the material deposition mechanism, a heater configured to move over the fabrication bed and to direct heat onto the source material deposited by the material deposition mechanism, and an energy source configured to be directed onto the deposited source material heated by the heater to cause sintering of the heated deposited source material.

[0005] According to some aspects, a method of fabricating an object via additive fabrication is provided, said additive fabrication comprising sintering a source material, the method comprising moving a material deposition mechanism over a fabrication bed and operating the material deposition mechanism to deposit source material onto the fabrication bed, directing heat from the heater onto the source material deposited by the material deposition mechanism by moving a heater over the fabrication bed, and sintering the heated deposited source material by directing an energy source onto the deposited source material heated by the heater.

[0006] The foregoing apparatus and method embodiments may be implemented with any suitable combination of aspects, features, and acts described above or in further detail below. These and other aspects, embodiments, and features of the present teachings can be more fully understood from the following description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0007] Various aspects and embodiments will be described with reference to the following figures. It should be appreciated that the figures are not necessarily drawn to scale. In the drawings, each identical or nearly identical component that is illustrated in various figures is represented by a like numeral. For purposes of clarity, not every component may be labeled in every drawing.

[0008] FIG. 1 depicts an illustrative selective laser sintering device, according to some embodiments;

[0009] FIG. 2 depicts an illustrative selective laser sintering device in which heating and material deposition mechanisms are combined, according to some embodiments;

[0010] FIG. 3 depicts an illustrative combined heating and material deposition assembly, according to some embodiments;

[0011] FIG. 4 depicts an illustrative selective laser sintering device in which heating and material deposition mechanisms are combined with an energy source, according to some embodiments;

[0012] FIG. 5A depicts an overhead view of a rotational assembly, according to some embodiments;

[0013] FIG. 5B depicts the rotational assembly of FIG. 5A within an illustrative selective laser sintering device, according to some embodiments;

[0014] FIG. 6A-B depict two different views of an assembly that combines infrared sensors with a heating array, according to some embodiments;

[0015] FIG. 7 is a block diagram of a system suitable for practicing aspects of the invention, according to some embodiments; and

[0016] FIG. 8 illustrates an example of a computing system environment on which aspects of the invention may be implemented.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0017] Some additive fabrication techniques, such as Selective Laser Sintering (SLS), form parts by fusing source material, such as one or more fine powders, together into larger solid masses. This process of fusing a source material is referred to herein as “consolidation,” and typically occurs by directing sufficient energy (e.g., heat and/or light) to the material to cause consolidation. Some energy sources, such as lasers, allow for direct targeting of energy into a small area or volume. Other energy sources, such as heat beds or heat lamps, direct energy into a comparatively broader area or volume of material. Since consolidation of source material typically occurs at or above a critical temperature, producing parts as intended requires effective management of temperature within the source material.

[0018] In order to form a part via sintering techniques from a plurality of layers, a layer of unconsolidated material is deposited onto a fabrication bed and then heated in desired locations to

consolidate regions of the layer. An additional layer of unconsolidated material is then deposited onto the fabrication bed over the first layer and further regions consolidated, and so forth until the part is formed.

[0019] In some additive fabrication systems, the unconsolidated source material is preheated to a temperature that is sufficiently high so as to require minimal additional energy exposure to trigger consolidation. For instance, some conventional systems utilize radiating heating elements that aim to consistently and uniformly heat both the uppermost layer and the volume of the material to a temperature below, but close to, the critical temperature for consolidation. A laser beam or other energy source directed at the material may then provide sufficient energy to reach the critical temperature and thereby cause consolidation. However, maintaining an elevated temperature in this manner prior to consolidation, sometimes referred to as “preheating,” poses numerous technical challenges.

[0020] Consistency of the temperature of preheated unconsolidated material may be critical to the successful fabrication of parts using the selective sintering process. In particular, the system should preferably maintain the temperature of the preheated unconsolidated material at as close to a constant temperature as feasible so that the total amount of energy actually delivered to an area of unconsolidated material can be predicted for a given energy exposure amount. Additionally, when consolidating the material, the system should preferably maintain the temperature of the material at or above its consolidation temperature for a sufficient time for the consolidation process to complete. Moreover, underheating of the material during fabrication may result in a failure of the material to consolidate and/or may result in inferior material properties within the fabricated part. As a result of these factors, consistent and even preheating of the unconsolidated material is highly desirable.

[0021] While conventional systems may employ numerous heating techniques, such as radiative or convective heating methods, such systems generally deposit unconsolidated material in a build region then wait for the unconsolidated material to be heated to an even temperature before performing consolidation. These heating techniques can significantly increase the amount of time needed to fabricate a part, since a waiting period must be performed prior to forming each layer of the part. Some conventional systems attempt to reduce this waiting period by heating the unconsolidated material prior to its deposition into the build region, but this may have the undesirable effect of degrading the unconsolidated material by exposing it to high temperatures for an extended period of time. Additionally, excessive heating of the material prior to deposition can lead to diminished flow characteristics which may cause the bed to tear or reduce the smoothness of coating as the material is deposited.

[0022] The inventors have recognized and appreciated that efficiency of a sintering additive fabrication process may be increased by combining a mechanism for depositing and leveling unconsolidated material with a mechanism for heating the unconsolidated material. In particular, one or more heating elements may be arranged to lead and/or follow a material deposition mechanism such that heat may be applied to the build region in concert with deposition of material. As a result of this technique, the heating and depositing steps may be performed closer together in time and/or heat may be applied more directly to the material than in conventional systems. As a result, greater control over material temperature may be achieved, thereby avoiding excess temperature exposure and subsequent undesirable changes to the material.

[0023] According to some embodiments, a heating element and a material deposition mechanism may be arranged in an additive fabrication device so that both can be moved simultaneously over a fabrication bed. The heating element may be arranged to pass over areas of the fabrication bed at the same time, or shortly after, the material deposition mechanism passes over the same areas. In some embodiments, the heating element and material deposition mechanism may be mechanically coupled together (e.g., attached to a common assembly). In some embodiments, the heating element and material deposition mechanism may be separately mounted and operated but

configured to move such that the heating element leads or follows the material deposition mechanism.

[0024] According to some embodiments, a heating element may be operated in a closed loop feedback mode such that an amount of heating produced is selected based on sensing the temperature of one or more regions of the build region. In some embodiments, such sensing may be accomplished via thermal imaging and/or other non-contact thermal sensing means of the fabrication bed.

[0025] The herein-described techniques for combining a mechanism for depositing and leveling unconsolidated material with a mechanism for heating the unconsolidated material may, as discussed above, result in a sintering additive fabrication process with greater efficiency. Nonetheless, the inventors have additionally recognized and appreciated techniques for further increasing efficiency by combining the heating and deposition mechanisms with a mechanism for consolidating material. In particular, unconsolidated preheated material may be consolidated by an energy source that is arranged to follow the material deposition and heating mechanisms and that is configured to direct energy to desired areas of the material. For instance, newly deposited and preheated material may be consolidated by a laser while the material deposition and heating mechanisms continue to move and prepare material in other areas of the fabrication bed.

[0026] In some embodiments, combined mechanisms for deposition, heating and consolidation may be arranged to rotate such that these mechanisms move continuously (or moved continuously except for a period in which the fabrication bed is lowered). For instance, the mechanisms may rotate around an axis such that they may be continuously moved in the same direction (in contrast to moving from one end of a fabrication bed to another, at which point the mechanisms must stop before reversing direction). As a result, even greater efficiency of a sintering additive fabrication device may be achieved by forming consolidated material continuously, or continuously except for a period in which the fabrication bed is lowered.

[0027] Following below are more detailed descriptions of various concepts related to, and embodiments of, techniques for combining mechanisms for depositing and preheating unconsolidated material in sintering additive fabrication techniques. It should be appreciated that various aspects described herein may be implemented in any of numerous ways. Examples of specific implementations are provided herein for illustrative purposes only. In addition, the various aspects described in the embodiments below may be used alone or in any combination, and are not limited to the combinations explicitly described herein.

[0028] An illustrative conventional selective laser sintering (SLS) additive fabrication device is illustrated in FIG. 1. In the example of FIG. 1, SLS device **100** comprises a laser **110** paired with a computer-controlled scanner system **115** disposed to operatively aim the laser **110** at the fabrication bed **130** and move over the area corresponding to a given cross-sectional area of a computer aided design (CAD) model representing a desired part. Suitable scanning systems may include one or more mechanical gantries, linear scanning devices using polygonal mirrors, and/or galvanometer-based scanning devices.

[0029] In the example of FIG. 1, the material in the fabrication bed **130** is selectively heated by the laser in a manner that causes the powder material particles to fuse (sometimes also referred to as “sintering” or “consolidating”) such that a new layer of the object **140** is formed. SLS is suitable for use with many different powdered materials, including any of various forms of powdered nylon. In some cases, areas around the fabrication bed (e.g., the walls **132**, the platform **131**, etc.) may include heating elements to heat the powder in the fabrication bed. Such heaters may be used to preheat unconsolidated material, as discussed above, prior to consolidation via the laser.

[0030] Once a layer has been successfully formed, the fabrication platform **131** may be lowered a predetermined distance by a motion system (not pictured in FIG. 1). Once the fabrication platform **131** has been lowered, the material deposition mechanism **125** may be moved across the fabrication bed **130**, spreading a fresh layer of material across the fabrication bed **130** to be consolidated as

described above. Mechanisms configured to apply a consistent layer of material onto the fabrication bed may include the use of wipers, rollers, blades, and/or other levelling mechanisms for moving material from a source of fresh material to a target location.

[0031] Since material in the powder bed **130** is typically only consolidated in certain locations by the laser, some material will generally remain within the bed in an unconsolidated state. This unconsolidated material is sometimes referred to as a “part cake.” In some embodiments, the part cake may be used to physically support features such as overhangs and thin walls during the formation process, allowing for SLS systems to avoid the use of temporary mechanical support structures, such as may be used in other additive manufacturing techniques such as stereolithography. In addition, this may further allow parts with more complicated geometries, such as moveable joints or other isolated features, to be printed with interlocking but unconnected components.

[0032] The above-described process of producing a fresh layer of powder and consolidating material using the laser repeats to form an object layer-by-layer until the entire object has been fabricated. Once the object has been fully fabricated, the object and the part cake may be cooled at a controlled rate so as to limit issues that may arise with fast cooling, such as warping or other distortion due to variable rate cooling. The object and part cake may be cooled while within the selective laser sintering apparatus, or removed from the apparatus after fabrication to continue cooling. Once fully cooled, the object can be separated from the part cake by a variety of methods. The unused material in the part cake may optionally be recycled for use in subsequent fabrication.

[0033] As discussed above, it is highly desirable in a system such as system **100** shown in FIG. **1** to wait for unconsolidated material that is delivered onto the fabrication bed to reach a consistent temperature before consolidating the material with the laser. This waiting period, which is performed for each layer of the object being fabricated, increases the time needed to fabricate the object.

[0034] FIG. **2** depicts an illustrative selective laser sintering device in which heating and material deposition mechanisms are combined, according to some embodiments. In illustrative system **200** shown in FIG. **2**, the laser or scanning system is omitted for clarity, however such a system could include these or another suitable energy source for consolidating preheated source material.

[0035] In the example of FIG. **2**, a preparatory assembly **250** is configured to move over the fabrication bed **230** and includes a heating mechanism **251** and a deposition mechanism **252**. As the preparatory assembly **250** moves, the deposition mechanism deposits unconsolidated material onto the fabrication bed, while the heating mechanism follows the deposition mechanism and heats the just-deposited material. As a result, heating and depositing of material are performed closer together in time and heat is applied more directly to unconsolidated material compared to conventional systems that employ preheating (e.g., compared to the system **100** shown in FIG. **1**).

[0036] According to some embodiments, heating mechanism **251** may include any electrically driven heating element or elements, including but not limited to one or more quartz tube heaters, ceramic heaters, heating coils, polymer PTC heaters, metal heaters (e.g., Nichrome, resistance wire, etched foil), or combinations thereof. The additive fabrication device **200** may include a controller configured to drive the heating mechanism to produce a desired amount of heat. While the illustrative example of FIG. **2** shows the heating mechanism **251** trailing the material deposition mechanism **252** (i.e., the heating mechanism is arranged to pass over material subsequent to its deposition), it will be appreciated that the heating mechanism may also be positioned to lead the material deposition mechanism **252** (i.e., the heating mechanism is arranged to pass over already-consolidated material subsequent to unconsolidated material being deposited over it). In some embodiments, heating mechanisms may be placed so as to both lead and trail the material deposition mechanism.

[0037] In some embodiments, heating elements other than the heating mechanism **251** may be embedded within, or otherwise thermally coupled to, the material deposition mechanism **252**. In

some embodiments, such heating elements may be disposed within a levelling mechanism (e.g., a roller) to heat or maintain the levelling mechanism at a desired temperature. The levelling mechanism, such as a roller, may then be placed into contact with the fabrication bed **230**, including newly deposited material, in order to increase, or decrease, the temperature of the portion of the fabrication bed contacted by the heated portion of the material deposition mechanism primarily via conductive heating.

[0038] In some cases, a heated levelling mechanism may not convey a desired amount of thermal energy into the fabrication bed. For instance, the levelling mechanism may not have sufficient contact with the fabrication bed and/or the levelling mechanism may be heated at a low intensity to avoid clumping and other material changes at the fabrication bed during the application of levelling means. In such cases, it may be advantageous for the deposition mechanism to include more than one levelling mechanism. These levelling mechanisms may be arranged to contact the surface of the fabrication bed in series as the preparatory assembly moves, with each such mechanism being maintained at an elevated temperature with respect to the fabrication bed **230**. In some embodiments, the additive fabrication device **200** may include one or more heating elements positioned to convey or direct heat through one or more devices or orifices associated with the material deposition mechanism **252**, or so as to maintain one or more components of the material deposition mechanism at a temperature different than the surrounding environment. Such heat may be conducted via conduction or flow of gas or fluid into or through the material deposition mechanism.

[0039] In some embodiments, heated gas or fluid may be directed onto the fabrication bed **230** and/or onto material in transit from the material deposition mechanism **252** to the fabrication bed to increase the temperature of the material via convection.

[0040] It will be appreciated that the various heating techniques described above, including heating unconsolidated material via the heating mechanism **251** and heating some or all of the deposition mechanism via heating elements positioned within or near to the deposition mechanism, may be employed in any suitable combination so that desired temperatures of unconsolidated material and of the fabrication bed may be achieved.

[0041] According to some embodiments, deposition mechanism **252** may include various forms of dispensing mechanisms, including but not limited to hoppers, fluidized powder transport tubing, mechanical augers, or combinations thereof. Such dispensing mechanism may further comprise dosing or other mechanism for regulating the amount of material dispensed through the deposition process, such as mechanical apertures, calibrated augers, rotating paddles, or other means known in the art. In some embodiments, the deposition mechanism may include one or more leveling mechanisms to produce a level layer of material after deposition. Such leveling mechanisms may include one or more wipers, rollers, blades, or combinations thereof.

[0042] FIG. **3** depicts an illustrative combined heating and material deposition assembly, according to some embodiments. Illustrative assembly **303** includes heating elements **301** positioned either side of a material deposition mechanism **302** within a frame **306**. The view shown in FIG. **3** is positioned to face down onto fabrication bed **304**. The frame **306** is configured to move across the fabrication bed **304** along axis **305**, so that some or all of the heating elements **301** pass over areas of the fabrication bed **304** at the same time as, or shortly after, the passage of the material deposition mechanism **302** due to the combined motion of the preparatory assembly **303**.

[0043] In the example of FIG. **3**, combined motion of the heating elements **301** and material deposition mechanism **302** is achieved by mechanically mounting or coupling the heating elements to the material deposition mechanism by attaching each to frame **306**. It will be appreciated that the heating elements **301** and material deposition mechanism **302** could, in other embodiments, be coupled to separate frames and moved independently over the fabrication bed.

[0044] In some embodiments, heating elements **301** may be mounted to the frame **306** such that a lower surface of the heating element moves parallel to the topmost surface of the fabrication bed

304, including any newly deposited material, at a predefined separation distance. In general, it may be advantageous to minimize such separation distances, in order to optimize the efficiency of heat application. Too close a proximity to the fabrication bed may increase the risk of particulates or other material from the fabrication bed coating, contaminating, or otherwise interfering with the heating element. Moreover, proximity to the fabrication bed may increase the degree to which non-uniformities in the heating element's production of heat result in non-uniformities in heating the fabrication bed. In some embodiments, the inventors have found separation distances between a heat element and the fabrication bed in the range of 0.1 mm-50 mm to be acceptable, with further optimization by routine testing of specific material types and heat sources. In some embodiments, one or more shrouds (not shown) may be added to the frame (or otherwise positioned around either or both heating elements) to direct thermal energy from the heating elements towards the powder surface, rather than to other areas or components of the device.

[0045] FIG. **4** depicts an illustrative selective laser sintering device in which heating and material deposition mechanisms are combined with an energy source, according to some embodiments. In the example of FIG. **4**, a preparatory assembly **450** is configured to move over the fabrication bed **430** and includes a heating mechanism **451**, a material deposition mechanism **452**, and an energy source **453**. As the preparatory assembly **450** moves, the material deposition mechanism **452** deposits unconsolidated material onto the fabrication bed, while the heating mechanism follows the deposition mechanism and heats the just-deposited material. Furthermore, the unconsolidated preheated material is then consolidated by energy source **453**. As a result, heating and depositing of material are performed closer together in time and heat is applied more directly to unconsolidated material compared to conventional systems that employ preheating (e.g., compared to the system **100** shown in FIG. **1**). In addition, consolidation can occur a very short time after preheating due to the physical proximity of the heating mechanism **451** and the energy source **453**.

[0046] Heating mechanism **451** and deposition mechanism **452** may be configured in any of the numerous ways described above with respect to heating mechanism **251** and deposition mechanism **252** shown in FIG. **2**. In some embodiments, energy source **453** may include a laser and scanning system and direct laser light onto the fabrication bed via the energy source. It will be appreciated that the energy source **453** may not necessary be the ultimate source of the energy so long as the energy from an initial source can be directed to the preparatory assembly to be directed onto the fabrication bed. For instance, energy source **453** may comprise a lens and/or an optical fiber mounted to the preparatory assembly **450** that is coupled to a laser source that is not mounted to the preparatory assembly but that can be operated to direct light to the lens and/or optical fiber.

[0047] In the example of FIG. **4**, the preparatory assembly is configured to move from across the fabrication bed, which results in a necessary stop at the exterior of the bed once the preparatory assembly reaches an edge of the bed. As discussed above, one approach to eliminate such stoppages is to rotate a preparatory assembly about an axis, thereby continually moving a deposition mechanism, heating mechanism and energy source.

[0048] FIG. **5A** depicts an overhead view of one such illustrative rotational assembly, according to some embodiments. In the example of FIG. **5A**, a preparatory system is illustrated that comprises radial arms **503** and **505** and axis **506**. This system may be configured to rotate in a direction **507** about the axis **506** at the center of an annular (or circular) fabrication bed **504**. Alternatively, the fabrication bed **504** itself may be rotated in direction **507** about the axis **506** such that portions of the rotary fabrication bed **504** pass under the preparatory system. In either case, the fabrication bed and preparatory system may be continuously moved relative to one another. As a result, simultaneous recoating, preheating, and exposure of a fabrication bed may be performed, thereby reducing delays for repositioning or inactive transit of the preparatory system. FIG. **5B** depicts a cross sectional view of the rotational assembly of FIG. **5A** within an illustrative selective laser sintering device, according to some embodiments.

[0049] Upon completion of exposure of a given layer of the fabrication bed **504**, the fabrication

platform may be lowered, or preparatory system raised, to allow for the deposition of fresh unconsolidated material on the fabrication bed. Alternatively, the fabrication platform may be lowered at a gradual rate, or in stages during the fabrication process. In particular, it may be advantageous to include additional radial structures **505** of the preparatory system, particularly when such systems further include means of independently delivering focused energy to the fabrication bed **507**. In such cases, production of parts may be accelerated by having more than one radial arm simultaneously operate on different sections of the fabrication bed **504**. As portions of the fabrication bed **504** pass below each portion of the preparatory system, said system may distribute new material, level said material, and/or preheat such material using included heating elements. And, when combined with a source of focused energy, said preparatory system may further expose new material to focused energy, causing consolidation, sintering, or other desirable material changes. The ability to conduct such processes in parallel may advantageously allow for the production of multiple separate objects simultaneously, for the production of multiple portions of the same object simultaneously, or for more complicated multiple step processing of the same portion of an object.

[0050] According to some embodiments, each of the illustrative portions **503** and **505** of the preparatory system may each include one or more heating elements, material deposition mechanisms and/or energy sources. In some embodiments, it may be beneficial to perform only some of the material deposition, preheating and consolidation acts with a given radial arm of the preparatory system. For instance, in the example of FIG. SA, adjacent pairs of radial arms may include, in a first case, a material deposition and leveling mechanism in addition to a heating element, and in a second case, an energy source only. As a result, when in motion, the same point on the fabrication bed may have material deposited, leveled and preheated when a first radial arm passes the point, and then undergo consolidation when the subsequent radial arm passes this point.

[0051] FIG. 6A-B depict two different views of an assembly that combines infrared sensors with a heating array, according to some embodiments. As shown in the example of FIGS. 6A-B, a preparatory mechanism (not shown) may include one or more infrared sensors **608** arrayed across the width of the preparatory mechanism with a given spacing. Such sensors **608** may be arranged between a plurality of heating elements **609** and a levelling device **602**.

[0052] As discussed above, it may be beneficial to sense the temperature of a fabrication bed and determine how to most effectively apply heat via heating element(s) based on the sensed temperature. Said determination may comprise operating one or more heating elements for a selected length of time and/or at a selected temperature based on the sensed temperature. In the example of FIGS. 6A-B, according to some embodiments, each of the heating elements may be independently operated based on a temperature sensed by respective adjacent sensors. In this manner, the heating elements in the array **609** may, in some embodiments, be operated at different temperatures and/or for different lengths of time.

[0053] Any suitable control scheme may be employed to operate heating elements **609** based on temperatures sensed by the sensors **608**. In some embodiments, an “open loop” control scheme may be appropriate based upon calculated or measured thermal characteristics of the larger system, so as to maintain a consistent and appropriate temperature for sintering at the fabrication bed. In some embodiments, various types of “closed loop” control systems, such as PID control of heating elements, may be utilized based upon one or more sensors positioned within the heating elements, material deposition mechanism, or other location.

[0054] In some embodiments, temperature sensing separate from the temperature sensors **608** may be additionally or alternatively performed via thermal imaging or other non-contact thermal sensing means of the fabrication bed itself. In general, the application of heat from sources immediately proximate to the fabrication bed may allow for significantly more efficient heating of material reducing both the peak and total power consumption of the device and also any unwanted secondary heating to other components of the device. Moreover, by applying heat more directly to

the material, additional control over material temperature may be achieved, avoiding excess temperature exposure and subsequent unwanted changes to the material. In addition, while the embodiments described above have generally applied heat uniformly over the fabrication bed **704**, some embodiments of the present invention may include multiple heaters **709** or heating zones in order to provide more fine grained control over various regions of the fabrication bed **704**. Such variable application of heat may be provided as a result of differences in starting temperature across the fabrication bed **704**, such as may be determined via non-contact thermal sensing of sufficient resolution, such as thermal imaging.

[0055] In some embodiments, application of different amounts of heat (and/or application of heat for different lengths of time) may be determined based upon patterns of prior exposure and heating or upon planned exposures and heating. As one example, previously sintered material may provide thermal energy to newly deposited material, such as discussed in U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 62/545,231, filed on Aug. 14, 2017, incorporated herein by reference. Accordingly less thermal energy may be applied onto newly distributed material overlaying previously sintered material. Alternatively, more thermal energy may be applied to material not overlaying such sintered material. In some embodiments, thermal energy may further be restricted to those portions of the fabrication bed expected to be sintered in the current or subsequent process steps. As one example, fabrication processes only exposing the center region of a larger fabrication bed may benefit from the application of heat to said center region and a sufficient margin distance.

[0056] According to some embodiments, it may be advantageous to arrange the heating elements **609** such that the sensors **608** pass over a given area of the fabrication bed **604** in advance of the heating elements **609**, in order to determine the appropriate degree of heating based upon the sensed heat. In some embodiments, such as described above in relation to FIG. 3 in the context of two rows of heaters, it may be advantageous to include multiple rows of sensors **608** such that the preparatory mechanism may be operated in more than one direction. In other embodiments, it may also be advantageous to have multiple rows of sensors **608** to increase the effective resolution or accuracy of measurements of temperatures from the fabrication bed **604**. Alternatively, multiple rows of sensors **608** may allow for measurement of temperature both prior to and following exposure of the fabrication bed **604**, thus allowing for improved calibration or detection of conditions requiring corrective steps such as additional passes, delay periods, or process suspension.

[0057] In some embodiments, the spacing between each of the infrared sensors **608** may be chosen at least in part based upon the field of view of the infrared sensor **608**, such that each infrared sensor **608** measures the infrared emissions of a separate area of the fabrication bed **604**. As will be appreciated, infrared sensors **608** may then be used to measure fabrication bed **604** temperature with an approximate resolution of said spacing in one direction and arbitrary resolution in the direction of motion of the preparatory mechanism. In other embodiments, however, such infrared sensors **608** may be spaced so as to cause a desired degree of overlap of fields of view. In some embodiments, the number and spacing of infrared sensors **608** may be the same as the number as spacing of heaters **609**. To the extent that a heater **609** has a greater field width in its thermal emissions than the infrared sensor **608** has field of view, however, it may be advantageous to have a reduced number of heaters **609**.

[0058] Various alterations, modifications, and improvements are intended to be part of this disclosure and within the spirit and scope of the invention. As one example, although embodiments disclosed herein above may be disclosed in terms of a moving preparatory mechanism and a stationary fabrication bed, it should be understood that the essential characteristic of such motion is relative and not absolute, and thus that other embodiments may be arranged such that the fabrication bed is instead moved while the preparatory is stationary, or further that both components may be motion with an effective relative motion with respect to one another. Further, while embodiments discussed above may be discussed in connection with the use of heat, it should

be understood that maintaining a desired temperature in material may also include the use of cooling elements, or elements capable of both heating and cooling, such as, for example, the use of one or more Peltier junctions within a levelling means.

[0059] Although the embodiments discussed herein may relate to selective sintering technology, it should be understood that other embodiments within the scope of the invention may be advantageous in other processes, such as high-speed sintering, inhibition sintering, three-dimensional printing, multi-jet modelling, or multi-jet fusion modeling. In some such embodiments, for example, a second liquid material may be added to newly deposited first material in order to modify various characteristics of said first material, including cohesiveness, color, or the degree and temperature at which said material must reach to consolidate or otherwise transform in a subsequent step. In these embodiments, one or more means for the delivery of a second material, such as a liquid or powdered substance, may be provided for in connection with the preparatory mechanism. As one example, one or more nozzles or orifices, such as inkjet-type dispensers, may be located across the width of the preparatory mechanism. On other instances, such dispensers may be mounted onto one or more heads capable of reciprocal motion along the width of the preparatory mechanism. In such cases, it may be advantageous to position heating elements, such as described above, so that heat is applied to the fabrication bed following deposition so as to modify the temperature of second material or otherwise induce a temperature-related change of state, such as evaporation of a solvent. Alternatively, it may be advantageous to preheat the first material, as discussed above, prior to the addition of the second material. Other modifications and methods of manufacturing will be obvious to those skilled in the art. Such modifications are intended to be part of this disclosure, and are intended to be within the scope of the invention.

[0060] FIG. 7 is a block diagram of a system suitable for practicing aspects of the invention, according to some embodiments. System **700** illustrates a system suitable for generating instructions to perform additive fabrication by a device utilizing a combined material deposition mechanism and heating mechanism, and subsequent operation of the additive fabrication device to fabricate an object. For instance, instructions to fabricate the object using an additive fabrication device, such as device **200** shown in FIG. 2 or device **400** shown in FIG. 4, may comprise instructions to operate a heating mechanism in concert with a deposition mechanism. In some cases, the instructions may also, when executed by the additive fabrication device, cause the additive fabrication device to operate an energy source in concert with the heating mechanism and deposition mechanism.

[0061] According to some embodiments, computer system **710** may execute software that generates two-dimensional layers that may each comprise sections of the object. Instructions may then be generated from this layer data to be provided to an additive fabrication device, such as additive fabrication device **720**, that, when executed by the device, fabricates the layers and thereby fabricates the object. Such instructions may be communicated via link **715**, which may comprise any suitable wired and/or wireless communications connection. In some embodiments, a single housing holds the computing device **710** and additive fabrication device **720** such that the link **715** is an internal link connecting two modules within the housing of system **700**.

[0062] FIG. 8 illustrates an example of a suitable computing system environment **800** on which the technology described herein may be implemented. For example, computing environment **800** may form some or all of the computer system **710** shown in FIG. 7. The computing system environment **800** is only one example of a suitable computing environment and is not intended to suggest any limitation as to the scope of use or functionality of the technology described herein. Neither should the computing environment **800** be interpreted as having any dependency or requirement relating to any one or combination of components illustrated in the exemplary operating environment **800**.

[0063] The technology described herein is operational with numerous other general purpose or special purpose computing system environments or configurations. Examples of well-known computing systems, environments, and/or configurations that may be suitable for use with the

technology described herein include, but are not limited to, personal computers, server computers, hand-held or laptop devices, multiprocessor systems, microprocessor-based systems, set top boxes, programmable consumer electronics, network PCs, minicomputers, mainframe computers, distributed computing environments that include any of the above systems or devices, and the like.

[0064] The computing environment may execute computer-executable instructions, such as program modules. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, objects, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. The technology described herein may also be practiced in distributed computing environments where tasks are performed by remote processing devices that are linked through a communications network. In a distributed computing environment, program modules may be located in both local and remote computer storage media including memory storage devices.

[0065] With reference to FIG. 8, an exemplary system for implementing the technology described herein includes a general purpose computing device in the form of a computer **810**. Components of computer **810** may include, but are not limited to, a processing unit **820**, a system memory **830**, and a system bus **821** that couples various system components including the system memory to the processing unit **820**. The system bus **821** may be any of several types of bus structures including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus, and a local bus using any of a variety of bus architectures. By way of example, and not limitation, such architectures include Industry Standard Architecture (ISA) bus, Micro Channel Architecture (MCA) bus, Enhanced ISA (EISA) bus, Video Electronics Standards Association (VESA) local bus, and Peripheral Component Interconnect (PCI) bus also known as Mezzanine bus.

[0066] Computer **810** typically includes a variety of computer readable media. Computer readable media can be any available media that can be accessed by computer **810** and includes both volatile and nonvolatile media, removable and non-removable media. By way of example, and not limitation, computer readable media may comprise computer storage media and communication media. Computer storage media includes volatile and nonvolatile, removable and non-removable media implemented in any method or technology for storage of information such as computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules or other data. Computer storage media includes, but is not limited to, RAM, ROM, EEPROM, flash memory or other memory technology, CD-ROM, digital versatile disks (DVD) or other optical disk storage, magnetic cassettes, magnetic tape, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other medium which can be used to store the desired information and which can be accessed by computer **810**. Communication media typically embodies computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules or other data in a modulated data signal such as a carrier wave or other transport mechanism and includes any information delivery media. The term “modulated data signal” means a signal that has one or more of its characteristics set or changed in such a manner as to encode information in the signal. By way of example, and not limitation, communication media includes wired media such as a wired network or direct-wired connection, and wireless media such as acoustic, RF, infrared and other wireless media. Combinations of the any of the above should also be included within the scope of computer readable media.

[0067] The system memory **830** includes computer storage media in the form of volatile and/or nonvolatile memory such as read only memory (ROM) **831** and random access memory (RAM) **832**. A basic input/output system **833** (BIOS), containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between elements within computer **810**, such as during start-up, is typically stored in ROM **831**. RAM **832** typically contains data and/or program modules that are immediately accessible to and/or presently being operated on by processing unit **820**. By way of example, and not limitation, FIG. 8 illustrates operating system **834**, application programs **835**, other program modules **836**, and program data **837**.

[0068] The computer **810** may also include other removable/non-removable, volatile/nonvolatile computer storage media. By way of example only, FIG. 8 illustrates a hard disk drive **841** that reads

from or writes to non-removable, nonvolatile magnetic media, a flash drive **851** that reads from or writes to a removable, nonvolatile memory **852** such as flash memory, and an optical disk drive **855** that reads from or writes to a removable, nonvolatile optical disk **856** such as a CD ROM or other optical media. Other removable/non-removable, volatile/nonvolatile computer storage media that can be used in the exemplary operating environment include, but are not limited to, magnetic tape cassettes, flash memory cards, digital versatile disks, digital video tape, solid state RAM, solid state ROM, and the like. The hard disk drive **841** is typically connected to the system bus **821** through a non-removable memory interface such as interface **840**, and magnetic disk drive **851** and optical disk drive **855** are typically connected to the system bus **821** by a removable memory interface, such as interface **850**.

[0069] The drives and their associated computer storage media discussed above and illustrated in FIG. **8**, provide storage of computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules and other data for the computer **810**. In FIG. **8**, for example, hard disk drive **841** is illustrated as storing operating system **844**, application programs **845**, other program modules **846**, and program data **847**. Note that these components can either be the same as or different from operating system **834**, application programs **835**, other program modules **836**, and program data **837**. Operating system **844**, application programs **845**, other program modules **846**, and program data **847** are given different numbers here to illustrate that, at a minimum, they are different copies. A user may enter commands and information into the computer **810** through input devices such as a keyboard **862** and pointing device **861**, commonly referred to as a mouse, trackball or touch pad. Other input devices (not shown) may include a microphone, joystick, game pad, satellite dish, scanner, or the like. These and other input devices are often connected to the processing unit **820** through a user input interface **860** that is coupled to the system bus, but may be connected by other interface and bus structures, such as a parallel port, game port or a universal serial bus (USB). A monitor **891** or other type of display device is also connected to the system bus **821** via an interface, such as a video interface **890**. In addition to the monitor, computers may also include other peripheral output devices such as speakers **897** and printer **896**, which may be connected through an output peripheral interface **895**.

[0070] The computer **810** may operate in a networked environment using logical connections to one or more remote computers, such as a remote computer **880**. The remote computer **880** may be a personal computer, a server, a router, a network PC, a peer device or other common network node, and typically includes many or all of the elements described above relative to the computer **810**, although only a memory storage device **881** has been illustrated in FIG. **8**. The logical connections depicted in FIG. **8** include a local area network (LAN) **871** and a wide area network (WAN) **873**, but may also include other networks. Such networking environments are commonplace in offices, enterprise-wide computer networks, intranets and the Internet.

[0071] When used in a LAN networking environment, the computer **810** is connected to the LAN **871** through a network interface or adapter **870**. When used in a WAN networking environment, the computer **810** typically includes a modem **872** or other means for establishing communications over the WAN **873**, such as the Internet. The modem **872**, which may be internal or external, may be connected to the system bus **821** via the user input interface **860**, or other appropriate mechanism. In a networked environment, program modules depicted relative to the computer **810**, or portions thereof, may be stored in the remote memory storage device. By way of example, and not limitation, FIG. **8** illustrates remote application programs **885** as residing on memory device **881**. It will be appreciated that the network connections shown are exemplary and other means of establishing a communications link between the computers may be used.

[0072] Having thus described several aspects of at least one embodiment of this invention, it is to be appreciated that various alterations, modifications, and improvements will readily occur to those skilled in the art.

[0073] Such alterations, modifications, and improvements are intended to be part of this disclosure,

and are intended to be within the spirit and scope of the invention. Further, though advantages of the present invention are indicated, it should be appreciated that not every embodiment of the technology described herein will include every described advantage. Some embodiments may not implement any features described as advantageous herein and in some instances one or more of the described features may be implemented to achieve further embodiments. Accordingly, the foregoing description and drawings are by way of example only.

[0074] The above-described embodiments of the technology described herein can be implemented in any of numerous ways. For example, the embodiments may be implemented using hardware, software or a combination thereof. When implemented in software, the software code can be executed on any suitable processor or collection of processors, whether provided in a single computer or distributed among multiple computers. Such processors may be implemented as integrated circuits, with one or more processors in an integrated circuit component, including commercially available integrated circuit components known in the art by names such as CPU chips, GPU chips, microprocessor, microcontroller, or co-processor. Alternatively, a processor may be implemented in custom circuitry, such as an ASIC, or semicustom circuitry resulting from configuring a programmable logic device. As yet a further alternative, a processor may be a portion of a larger circuit or semiconductor device, whether commercially available, semi-custom or custom. As a specific example, some commercially available microprocessors have multiple cores such that one or a subset of those cores may constitute a processor. However, a processor may be implemented using circuitry in any suitable format.

[0075] Further, it should be appreciated that a computer may be embodied in any of a number of forms, such as a rack-mounted computer, a desktop computer, a laptop computer, or a tablet computer. Additionally, a computer may be embedded in a device not generally regarded as a computer but with suitable processing capabilities, including a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), a smart phone or any other suitable portable or fixed electronic device.

[0076] Also, a computer may have one or more input and output devices. These devices can be used, among other things, to present a user interface. Examples of output devices that can be used to provide a user interface include printers or display screens for visual presentation of output and speakers or other sound generating devices for audible presentation of output. Examples of input devices that can be used for a user interface include keyboards, and pointing devices, such as mice, touch pads, and digitizing tablets. As another example, a computer may receive input information through speech recognition or in other audible format.

[0077] Such computers may be interconnected by one or more networks in any suitable form, including as a local area network or a wide area network, such as an enterprise network or the Internet. Such networks may be based on any suitable technology and may operate according to any suitable protocol and may include wireless networks, wired networks or fiber optic networks.

[0078] Also, the various methods or processes outlined herein may be coded as software that is executable on one or more processors that employ any one of a variety of operating systems or platforms. Additionally, such software may be written using any of a number of suitable programming languages and/or programming or scripting tools, and also may be compiled as executable machine language code or intermediate code that is executed on a framework or virtual machine.

[0079] In this respect, the invention may be embodied as a computer readable storage medium (or multiple computer readable media) (e.g., a computer memory, one or more floppy discs, compact discs (CD), optical discs, digital video disks (DVD), magnetic tapes, flash memories, circuit configurations in Field Programmable Gate Arrays or other semiconductor devices, or other tangible computer storage medium) encoded with one or more programs that, when executed on one or more computers or other processors, perform methods that implement the various embodiments of the invention discussed above. As is apparent from the foregoing examples, a computer readable storage medium may retain information for a sufficient time to provide

computer-executable instructions in a non-transitory form. Such a computer readable storage medium or media can be transportable, such that the program or programs stored thereon can be loaded onto one or more different computers or other processors to implement various aspects of the present invention as discussed above. As used herein, the term “computer-readable storage medium” encompasses only a non-transitory computer-readable medium that can be considered to be a manufacture (i.e., article of manufacture) or a machine. Alternatively or additionally, the invention may be embodied as a computer readable medium other than a computer-readable storage medium, such as a propagating signal.

[0080] The terms “program” or “software,” when used herein, are used in a generic sense to refer to any type of computer code or set of computer-executable instructions that can be employed to program a computer or other processor to implement various aspects of the present invention as discussed above. Additionally, it should be appreciated that according to one aspect of this embodiment, one or more computer programs that when executed perform methods of the present invention need not reside on a single computer or processor, but may be distributed in a modular fashion amongst a number of different computers or processors to implement various aspects of the present invention.

[0081] Computer-executable instructions may be in many forms, such as program modules, executed by one or more computers or other devices. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, objects, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. Typically the functionality of the program modules may be combined or distributed as desired in various embodiments.

[0082] Also, data structures may be stored in computer-readable media in any suitable form. For simplicity of illustration, data structures may be shown to have fields that are related through location in the data structure. Such relationships may likewise be achieved by assigning storage for the fields with locations in a computer-readable medium that conveys relationship between the fields. However, any suitable mechanism may be used to establish a relationship between information in fields of a data structure, including through the use of pointers, tags or other mechanisms that establish relationship between data elements.

[0083] Various aspects of the present invention may be used alone, in combination, or in a variety of arrangements not specifically discussed in the embodiments described in the foregoing and is therefore not limited in its application to the details and arrangement of components set forth in the foregoing description or illustrated in the drawings. For example, aspects described in one embodiment may be combined in any manner with aspects described in other embodiments.

[0084] Also, the invention may be embodied as a method, of which an example has been provided. The acts performed as part of the method may be ordered in any suitable way. Accordingly, embodiments may be constructed in which acts are performed in an order different than illustrated, which may include performing some acts simultaneously, even though shown as sequential acts in illustrative embodiments.

[0085] Further, some actions are described as taken by a “user.” It should be appreciated that a “user” need not be a single individual, and that in some embodiments, actions attributable to a “user” may be performed by a team of individuals and/or an individual in combination with computer-assisted tools or other mechanisms.

[0086] Use of ordinal terms such as “first,” “second,” “third,” etc., in the claims to modify a claim element does not by itself connote any priority, precedence, or order of one claim element over another or the temporal order in which acts of a method are performed, but are used merely as labels to distinguish one claim element having a certain name from another element having a same name (but for use of the ordinal term) to distinguish the claim elements.

[0087] Also, the phraseology and terminology used herein is for the purpose of description and should not be regarded as limiting. The use of “including,” “comprising,” or “having,”

“containing,” “involving,” and variations thereof herein, is meant to encompass the items listed thereafter and equivalents thereof as well as additional items.

Claims

1-7. (canceled)

8. An additive fabrication device configured to produce three-dimensional objects by sintering a source material within a fabrication bed, the device comprising: a fabrication bed; an assembly configured to move laterally across a surface of the fabrication bed; and a material deposition mechanism coupled to the assembly and configured to deposit source material onto the fabrication bed as the assembly moves laterally across the surface of the fabrication bed, wherein the material deposition mechanism includes: a levelling mechanism configured to contact the deposited source material; and at least one heating element arranged within the levelling mechanism and configured to heat the levelling mechanism, wherein the levelling mechanism is configured to heat the deposited source material via conductive heating.

9. The additive fabrication device of claim 8, wherein the material deposition mechanism comprises a plurality of leveling mechanisms.

10. The additive fabrication device of claim 9, wherein the plurality of levelling mechanisms are configured to contact the source material on the fabrication bed in series as the assembly moves laterally across the surface of the fabrication bed.

11. The additive fabrication device of claim 8, wherein the at least one heating element is configured to heat the leveling mechanism to a temperature greater than a temperature of the fabrication bed.

12. The additive fabrication device of claim 8, wherein the levelling mechanism is a roller.

13. The additive fabrication device of claim 8, wherein the levelling mechanism is a wiper.

14. The additive fabrication device of claim 8, further comprising an energy source configured to be directed onto the deposited source material heated by the levelling mechanism to cause sintering of the heated deposited source material.

15. The additive fabrication device of claim 14, wherein the energy source is coupled to the assembly.
