

Characterization and Simulation of a Worm-Inspired Robot*

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Abstract—Soft-bodied invertebrates such as earthworms achieve efficient movement through coordinated peristaltic contractions of their body segments. This project explores this unique locomotive paradigm and examines its potential as a robotic framework.

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Traditional rigid robots struggle in confined or irregular terrains (e.g., pipelines, soil, rubble). Soft-bodied worms offer a biological blueprint for adaptable motion via peristalsis. Understanding and simulating this mode of movement can inform the design of soft robots capable of traversing restrictive environments (e.g., medical endoscopy, search-and-rescue, pipeline inspection). Although peristaltic motion is effectively one-dimensional, it exhibits remarkable movement economy compared to limb-based locomotion, making it an efficient and robust strategy for soft robotic applications. The movement pattern is predictable yet surprisingly well-adapted to varied surface conditions, permitted surface contact can be maintained.

We gain insight into this mode of movement through the development of a computational model and simulation of a soft robotic worm. By capturing the coupling between actuation patterns, soft body mechanics and deformation, and frictional interactions with the environment, this model will provide insights into the fundamental physics and control strategies that enable efficient soft-bodied motion.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Peristalsis Mechanics

It is first important to understand the underlying biomechanics that allow worms to move forward. The theory of peristalsis can then be shaped into a functional robot model.

At a high level, peristalsis is perceived as a wave-like propagation of muscle contraction and subsequent relaxation that is practiced repeatedly starting from the head to the toe of a worm's body. One contentious topic of discussion regarding the theory of peristalsis is the role of friction. Some believe friction is not the predominant source of movement, and that momentum transfer inside the body may be the driving mechanism. However, one way friction is believed to propel the worm is by providing a stationary anchor for segments in front of the actuated tissue to lurch forward. Simulation may reveal deeper truths about the mechanics of peristalsis.

However we may believe peristalsis drives forward locomotion, sequential wave-like contraction is the fundamental action that characterizes peristalsis, and any virtual or physical system should be built around this behavior.

Understanding the contraction pattern also means understanding the structure and supporting contractile elements that support this motion. The general structure of soft-bodied invertebrates is described as a hydrostatic skeleton, a type of skeleton supported by hydrostatic fluid pressure instead of rigid bony elements found in vertebrates. Worms retain their shape through the internal fluids that resist changes in volume. Forced changes in skeleton shape (contraction and relaxation) are governed by two major groupings of muscles. Longitudinal muscles that run along the length of the worm contract and extend axially, while circular, radial, and transverse musculature contract and extend radially. The paired action of these groups coordinated in a phase-based manner running along segments of the worm is what ultimately produces forward motion. Robotic systems must mimic the radial and longitudinal contraction efforts to respectively anchor and extend forward.

With the mechanics and the physical biological system understood, we can look to shape the structural makeup, actuation method, and control methodology of the bio-mimetic robot. These design aspects are inherently interdependent, each informing and constraining the others in the overall system design.

B. Material Construction

The robot's exterior, or skeleton, so to speak, needs to be of pliable but durable/robust construction to accommodate a mode of actuation while being deformable to respond to actuation stimulus. This compliance of the structure can be of a mechanical nature or achieved materially.

C. Actuation Framework

A class of material important to the field of soft robotics is smart materials. They often couple some form of external stimulus to mechanical response. The study of smart materials and their application has proven substantive in the creation of robotic worms. Smart materials seek to directly manipulate the surface manifold to produce contraction and relaxation, such that the structure itself becomes the method of action.

- Shape Memory Alloys (SMAs) is one prevalent example of a smart material. They can reset back to a predefined structure when met with ample heat. They have the highest work density compared to other smart materials, meaning a small amount of material can generate a lot

*This work was not supported by any organization

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of work. They are not fast, but can behave responsively at microscale (such as the case of Micro helix SMAs, which have strain ratios of up to 200% and can be actuated in under a second). One implementation of SMA actuation has SMAs structures wrapped around the robot and actuated by wiring that also constitutes the braided mesh, creating seamless integration of actuation and structural framework.

- Dielectric Elastomers (DEAs) are another smart material that have a use case in building robotic worms. DEAs consist of a passive elastomer sandwiched between 2 compliant electrodes. Applied voltage acts between the electrodes and inadvertently squeezes the elastomer film through electrostatic pressure, causing expansion of material. DEAs can be shaped around a tube-like structure and actuated to mimic the pulsating activation pattern required for peristalsis [6].
- Ionic polymer–metal composites (IPMCs): like DEAs, IPMCs are electroactive polymers. However, actuation is based on the migration/displacement of ions within a hydrated polymer matrix when a voltage is applied, causing the material to bend (a bimorph motion). IPMCs are slower in actuation compared to DEAs, but require low driving voltages.

Fluid-based actuators result in high force, precise, and controllable action that changes the shape of the worm from within. This action may perhaps more naturally mirror the biological model of actuation. However, they present their own set of limitations.

- Pneumatics: Movement of compressed air to drive contraction of artificial muscles contained within the skin wall. The theoretical basis of pneumatics is simple but hard to implement. Additionally, they require bulky pumps, resulting in an unwieldy construction.
- Hydrostatic Fluid Actuators: similar to pneumatics in that fluids are used to drive action. This method also has size scaling limitations, requiring an effective micro-hydraulic piston.
- Magnetic fluid: magnetic attraction of magnetic fluid embedded within the segmented worm as a permanent magnet passes over each self-contained body segment is one way to create patterned expansion. The challenge lies in the mechanism that moves the permanent magnet with minimal intervention.

D. Control Strategy

Open Loop Control

- The simplest control strategy employs an open-loop sinusoidal input applied to each body segment. This approach produces periodic contractions and relaxations that mimic biological peristalsis. When the actuation mode supports continuity, the control signal can be formulated as a continuous traveling sinusoidal wave along the worm's body.

Intelligent Control Design

- Close loop: close loop feedback control can be designed around certain measurable state variables, such as measure contraction/expansion of each segment (segment length/strain sensors) and position sensors (track head or body centroid movement). Local segment tracking combined with global body motion correction can be used to achieve a desired velocity.
- Stable heteroclinic channels (SHCs) [5]: SHCs are a mathematical framework that allows smooth transitions between stable manifolds crossing unstable bridges.
- Neural Circuits: Neural circuit control design is inspired by biological neural drive operated through central pattern generators (CPGs).

III. APPROACH

A. Model Progression

The worm is represented as a series of deformable segments actuated by a traveling contraction wave, enabling net forward motion through phase-shifted actuation. By building upon existing soft robotics modeling frameworks such as Cosserat rod formulations, this work aims to develop a computational foundation for studying efficient, biologically inspired soft locomotion. It is also important to match the computational framework to the intended mechanical system that achieves the bio-mimetic behavior. As we have discussed, the possible actuation methods and accompanying structures vary greatly even when applied to the same movement scheme.

One model presents the worm as a segmented series of connected four-bar linkages that expand vertically and shorten horizontally when activated.

The model can then be further generalized to a 3D structure.

B. Performance Metrics

The simulation will explore how actuation frequency, amplitude, and friction anisotropy influence locomotion performance. The results are expected to provide insight into control and design strategies for soft robots operating in constrained or complex environments.

The project will explore the relationship between actuation phase patterns and segment deformation, frictional interactions with the environment, and body compliance and stiffness distribution.

An analytical framework surrounding these relationships and gain insight into locomotion efficiency and metabolic activity, maneuverability, stability, and control responsiveness to identify design parameters that optimize performance.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This project establishes a computational foundation for investigating efficient soft robotic locomotion. The insights gained from modeling actuation and body-environment interactions will guide the design of soft robots capable of adaptive and robust movement in complex settings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author thanks Professor Khalid Jawed for guidance and instruction throughout the MAE 263F Soft Robotics course. Their insights into soft robotic modeling formed the foundation of this project.

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