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Praca Dyplomowa Magisterska Real Time Digital Pulse Processing from Radiation Detectors Using Field Programmable Gate Arrays inż. Wojciech Mateusz Walewski Nr albumu: 239587

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Streszczenie

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Concerns regarding the sustainability of using fossil fuels for energy generation have been raised as early as the 1970s [1]. One of the most well-known examples from that time was the 1972 report titled "Limits to Growth" by Meadows et. al. [2]. In it a group of MIT scientists attempted to answer the question of how long will the Earth's natural resources last for considering the seemingly neverending growth of human civilisation. As a result of a conducted computer simulation, a rough estimate of around 100 years was given as a timeframe, after which the population would start to collapse due to a lack of resources.

This estimate did not go without controversies back when it was first published. The methodology was thoroughly picked apart leading many to dismiss the study findings [1]. Naturally, nowadays, we are much better poised to verify the claims made by the now 50 year old book. The impeding resource depletion has certainly been made a less valid claim as technological progress made it possible to locate and tap into previously inaccesible fossil fuel fields [3]. Taking into account other issues, however, the original timeline of 100 years might have actually shifted closer.

When it comes to fossil fuel usage, in the last twenty years, the primary concerns have changed from resource depletion to global warming and irreversible environmental damage [1]. In 2018 the Intergovermental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a report indicating the need to stop the global temperature increase at 1.5°C above the levels measurable in the pre-industrial era. Failure to do so is projected to lead to irreversible climate changes and in turn serious damage to human settlements around the world [4].

Fossil fuels account for as much as 70% of greenhouse gas emissions. Electricity generation alone causes 25-35% [5] of the total amount. Such a high share means that reducing this output is going to be crucial in meeting the goals outlined by the IPCC. At the beginning of the twentieth century, renewable energies, i.e. wind, solar, biomass and geothermal were thought to be the perfect solution to the issue at hand [6].

In modern times, we have now become aware of multiple issues that make renewable energy generation a problem at large scale. Most importantly, their efficacy varies depending on the geographical location and climate. Even when placed in optimal conditions, they do not offer perfect stability. Additionally, the land usage is greater than the traditional forms of energy production [7].

1.2 Fission energy

The drawbacks of renewable energies have led to a formation of an alternative approach in both research and policymaking. The use of nuclear energy for supplementing the shortcomings of renewables has been suggested as a potential path forward. This concept is referred to as hybrid nuclear-renewable system. [8].

There are two ways that nuclear energy can be created and harnessed. In the more well-established technology, fission, heavy atoms (usually Uranium) are bombarded with neutrons and split into two or more lighter nuclei and additional neutrons. The reaction is self-sustaining and releases energy in the form of heat that is then used to boil water. The steam causes turbines to spin and generate electricity.

Fission is far from a new concept, as first fission reactors have been built as early as 1942 [9]. Although the technology itself is quite old and has been greatly improved over time, there is reasonable reluctance to build and use fission power plants. The issue that gets raised most often is the storage of radioactive waste. There are, however, multiple less well-known problems with fission [10].

The tragedies of Chornobyl and Fukushima reactors have caused many people to be wary of fission. However, even if democratic support is disregarded in policymaking, the acquisition, storage and disposal of radioactive materials required for and produced during fission prove to be an administrative challenge, especially if reactor construction and maintenance is to be handled by private entities [11]. The complexity of the problem suggests that as we arrive to more concrete solutions we should not stop exploring other potential alternatives.

1.3 Fusion energy

Just like it is possible to split atoms, it is also possible to combine them together in a process referred to as fusion. What is more, by fusing atoms lighter than Iron the reaction can also produce surplus energy, that can be used to generate electricity. The conditions necessary for fusion to happen are extremely harder to achieve and then sustain [12].

Fusion is the primary reaction that cause stars to emit energy. The fusion that is artificially attempted on Earth differs in the input components from that occurring naturally in the Sun. A p-p reaction, where 4 protons are converted into ^{4}He. Replicating this reaction on a larger scale is extremely challenging due to the need to convert protons into neutrons. Our fusion experiments primarily rely on using hydrogen isotopes, most commonly deuterium (D) and tritium (T).

Despite being an easier approach, it still requires us to sustain a 200 million $^\circ$C plasma. This means that an enormous amount of energy must be used to first heat the plasma up and then confine it to prevent it from completely destroying the reactor. The efficiency of D-T reactions might, however, worth the trouble. Theoretically, just 30 mg of deuterium would generate as much energy as 250 l of gasoline [13].

Such numbers sound incredible, but there are naturally multiple drawbacks too. Tritium, the other input material of this most promising reaction is extremely rare in nature. Its artificial production is currently done only by a select number of facilities. Combined with its relatively short half-life of around 12 years, there are fears of it running out. It is proven that fusion reactors will be capable of ”breeding” their own tritium, however the transition period may still prove to be troublesome [14].

In the end, despite being a similarly old technology as fission [15], a fusion reactor with a net positive energy balance has not yet been constructed. Containing plasma heated to such extreme temperatures cannot be achieved with any solid material and must be done with the use of inertial or magnetic forces. The most common reactors that employ this concept are: tokamaks and stellarators. The former design has been selected for probably the most ambitious fusion project to date, the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor [13].

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