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Beyond Silicon: The Advent of Biomolecular Computing

Neil B. Panchal*

Department of Pharmacy, Sumandeep Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University,
Piparia, Waghodia, Vadodara, Gujarat, India.

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Bio computing is an emerging interdisciplinary field that harnesses the information processing capabilities of biological substrates like DNA, proteins and cells to perform computational tasks. Rather than relying solely on conventional silicon-based computers, bio computing leverages the innate computational properties of biomolecules to encode, store, process and transmit information in unconventional ways. Core approaches include DNA computing, which uses DNA biochemistry to solve problems in a massively parallel fashion. Protein computing utilizes protein conformational dynamics to implement logic gates and communication modules for molecular information processing. Cellular computing focuses on engineering gene circuits and synthetic biology tools to program computational behaviours in living cells. Neural computing builds artificial neural networks inspired by biological brains. Key application areas include biomedicine, smart drug delivery systems, biosensing, hybrid organic-inorganic electronics, and biomolecular manufacturing. While still facing challenges around biocompatibility, programming complexity and ethical concerns, bio computing has achieved major technical milestones demonstrating its promise. Continued progress at the interface of biology and computing could enable future technologies like bio processors, in-vivo biocomputers, living materials and bio-intelligent systems. With responsible development, bio-inspired computation may catalyse the next revolution in human technological capabilities. This emerging field thus warrants enthusiastic attention as computation further converges with the living world.

Keywords: Biocomputing; Bionics; Biologics; Bioelectronics; Wetware.

Bio computing is an exciting interdisciplinary field that utilizes biological materials to perform computations and information processing tasks.[1] Instead of using traditional silicon-based computers, bio computing leverages the information storage and processing capabilities of biomolecules like DNA, proteins and cells. The key idea is that many biological molecules and systems already perform logic operations, data storage and communications as part of their normal functioning.[2] Bio computing aims to understand these natural capabilities and engineer new synthetic biological systems to carry out useful computational tasks.[3,4]

Some examples of bio computing include:

• DNA computing - Using DNA and molecular biology tools to solve mathematical problems. DNA molecules can encode information and molecular operations on DNA like annealing can perform parallel computations.[5,6]

*Corresponding author E-mail: neil.dop@sumandeepvidyapeethdu.edu.in

• Protein computing - Using protein interactions and conformational changes to perform logic operations and calculations. Proteins can switch between different confirmations in response to inputs like other molecules binding, allowing them to mimic logic gates and circuits.[7–10]

• Cellular computing - Programming gene circuits and networks within living cells to carry out sensing, information processing and actuation tasks. Synthetic biology allows engineering cells with toggle switches, oscillators, logic gates etc.[11,12]

• Neural computing - Building artificial neural networks that are inspired by information processing in biological brains. The connections between neural network nodes mimic the synaptic signaling between neurons in the brain.[13–16]

• Molecular computing - Designing and synthesizing molecules with specific structures so they can implement algorithmic functions and calculations when reacting with each other. The molecules effectively act as tiny programmable computers.[17,18]

Overall, bio computing provides an alternative paradigm to silicon computing by storing and processing information in biological substrates. It holds exciting promise for developing future biocompatible computing devices and interfacing them with biological systems.

History and origins of bio computing

The foundations of bio computing were laid in the 1990s through pioneering work by computer scientists and biologists exploring the information processing capabilities of DNA and proteins.[19,20] In 1994, Leonard Adleman demonstrated the first example of DNA computing by solving a small instance of the directed Hamilton Path problem using DNA molecules[6,21]. This seminal work established the possibility of using DNA biochemistry to perform computational operations.[21]

The field advanced significantly in subsequent years. In 1996, actual wet lab DNA computing systems were developed to solve chess problems and other computational challenges.[22,23] Early proponents like Erik Winfree demonstrated simple DNA-based "robots" and computational circuits[24,25]. By 2002, gene regulatory networks were engineered to mimic neural network computations for pattern recognition tasks. [26–28]

Protein computing also emerged in the 1990s, spearheaded by groups like Ehud Shapiro who designed in vitro enzymatic logic gates performing Boolean operations[29–31]. Other advances included designing molecular Turing machines based on proteins and using protein molecular recognition for biomolecular interfacing. The interdisciplinary field of synthetic biology greatly expanded the toolkit for engineering gene circuits and cellular computing systems.[29,31,32]

On the neural computing front, significant progress was made in modeling biological neurons and training artificial neural networks for pattern recognition and machine learning. Novel neural inspired algorithms like deep learning revolutionized fields like computer vision and natural language processing.[33]

Today, bio computing encompasses a diverse array of techniques harnessing DNA, proteins, cells, biomolecules and neural networks for information processing. Early visionary experiments have grown into a thriving research arena with conferences, journals and dedicated labs around the globe. Ongoing innovations promise an exciting future for biologically-inspired computation.[34–36]

Key tools and techniques used in bio computing

Bio computing relies on the convergence of engineering and biotechnology to design, build, and optimize biological substrates for information processing and computation. This requires an extensive interdisciplinary toolkit to read, write, analyze and interface with DNA, proteins, cells and tissues.[3]

DNA sequencing tools, such as next-generation sequencing, enable the rapid and cost-effective deciphering of genetic information within DNA, facilitating the design of synthetic gene circuits. Complementing this, directed evolution methods like error-prone Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) can be employed to engineer proteins and enzymes, tailoring them to exhibit specific computational properties. Meanwhile, rational protein engineering through techniques like site-directed mutagenesis refines protein structure and function, aligning them with precise computational requirements. These combined approaches empower researchers to craft custom biological components, paving the way for innovative applications in synthetic biology, biocomputing, and beyond.[37–39]

Gene synthesis techniques provide a cost-effective and rapid means to create novel genetic constructs for implementing biocomputational designs. Researchers can easily order synthetic genes from commercial vendors, receiving DNA fragments tailored to their specifications. This streamlined approach accelerates the development of customized biological components, facilitating the realization of innovative biocomputing applications across various fields, including synthetic biology and biotechnology.[40] Automated liquid handling robotics enable efficient assembly of genetic circuits at high-throughput rates. Concurrently, CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing tools offer precise host cell genome modifications, optimizing computational designs by tailoring the cellular environment. This synergy of technologies accelerates the development of advanced bio-computational systems and applications, ranging from synthetic biology to biotechnology.[41,42]

Microfluidics technology revolutionizes bio-computing experiments by offering precise control over tiny fluid and cell volumes. Microfluidic chips, featuring integrated valves, channels, and chambers, enable the creation of programmable environments. Researchers harness this capability to conduct cellular computing and construct intricate biomolecular logic circuits. The versatility of microfluidics serves as a pivotal tool for advancing bio-computational research and applications in diverse fields, ranging from synthetic biology and biotechnology to cutting-edge biomedical engineering. Nanopore technology is a revolutionary approach to DNA/RNA sequencing, offering label-free single-molecule sensing. It operates through a nanoscale pore in a membrane. As DNA or RNA molecules are threaded through this pore, changes in electrical conductivity are detected in real-time, allowing for the precise identification of nucleotide sequences. This method eliminates the need for complex labeling procedures and provides high-resolution, rapid, and cost-effective sequencing. Nanopore technology holds great promise for genomics research, clinical diagnostics, and various applications requiring accurate and efficient molecular analysis.[43,44]

Fluorescence microscopy techniques, such as Fluorescence Resonance Energy Transfer (FRET) imaging, play a vital role in debugging genetic circuits by tracking molecular interactions within living cells. FRET relies on the principle that when two fluorophores are in close proximity, energy is transferred from one to the other, resulting in measurable fluorescence changes. By tagging molecules of interest with different fluorophores and observing their interactions through changes in fluorescence, researchers can gain insights into the behavior of genetic circuits in real-time, helping to optimize and debug their functionality.[45] High-throughput screening tools are instrumental in testing extensive libraries of protein/DNA variants to identify those with the desired computational properties. The mechanism involves subjecting these variants to automated, rapid, and parallel assays, allowing the evaluation of their functional characteristics on a large scale. This screening process facilitates the selection of candidates that exhibit the most promising computational traits, expediting the development and optimization of biocomputational designs, such as synthetic gene circuits or protein-based computations.[46] Biosensors are pivotal in biocomputing, serving as intermediaries that convert biological signals into measurable outputs and enable seamless interfacing with biocomputing systems. These devices typically consist of biological components, such as enzymes or antibodies, coupled with transducers that translate biological responses into electrical, optical, or other quantifiable signals. By detecting specific biomolecules or biological events, biosensors facilitate real-time monitoring, data acquisition, and signal processing within biocomputing systems, allowing for dynamic, responsive, and precise computational functions in various applications.[47]

Biocomputational modeling is instrumental in predicting and simulating the dynamics of gene circuits, protein interactions, and neuron behaviors before experimental implementation. Tools like the Systems Biology Markup Language (SBML) allow researchers to construct detailed mathematical models that represent biological system dynamics. These models incorporate parameters and equations to simulate the behavior of biological components, providing insights into how these systems function and respond to different inputs, ultimately aiding in the design and optimization of biocomputing systems and experiments.[48–50]

Ongoing advances in these core tools along with innovations in biomaterials, bioprinting, and bioelectronics promise to expand the capabilities of bio computing moving forward. The interdisciplinary toolkit combining engineering and biotechnology principles is key to realizing many of the futuristic applications envisioned in the field.[51–53]

Key applications and implementations of bio computing

Bio computing is catalyzing innovative applications across diverse domains including biomedicine, smart therapeutics, environmental sensing, materials science and hybrid bioelectronic devices. Researchers are harnessing the unique capabilities of biological substrates to design and engineer novel computational systems.

In biomedicine, one prominent application area is developing systems for early disease diagnosis and continuous monitoring. Cancer detection systems have been demonstrated using artificial neural networks that analyze proteomic biomarkers in blood samples. By training on patient datasets, these Artificial Intelligence (AI) cancer classifiers can identify difficult to diagnose cancers like ovarian cancer based on biomarker profiles.[54–56] Neural networks have also shown promise in medical image analysis, providing computer-aided diagnostics for improved treatment planning.[57,58]

Beyond diagnosis, bio computing is enabling smart drug delivery systems. Implantable bionanosensors have been proposed using protein logic gates to detect multiple biomarker inputs and decide molecular actuator functions accordingly. This biomolecular calculus, mimicking electronic circuits, allows intelligent therapeutic delivery tailored to personalized biomarker profiles.[59–61] Portable smartphone-integrated biosensors are also being developed for rapid point-of-care diagnosis.[62] Other efforts have explored engineering probiotic gut bacteria that sense pathogens in the gastrointestinal tract and secrete therapeutic compounds as desired.[6364]

In synthetic biology, engineered gene circuits and reprogrammed cells are being applied for portable and rapid disease screening. For instance, researchers designed whole-cell biosensors that produce a fluorescent output signal in response to the cancer biomarker interleukin-[6].[12,65] Such engineered living cells could offer continuous disease monitoring via implantable devices. Wearable fluorescent biosensors are also being integrated with smartphones for on-site diagnosis.[66,67]

Beyond medicine, DNA computing circuits have been applied for bio molecular analysis automation in Research and Development (R&D) labs. Systems have been engineered to solve optimization problems like the shortest path for analysing fluorescence microscopy images. DNA reaction networks that cascade over time act as chemical amplifiers for enhancing bioassay target detection. DNA tile self-assembly has also been leveraged to construct nucleic acid nanomaterials for drug delivery.[68–70]

Bio computing is also advancing hybrid bioelectronic systems, combining engineered biology with electronic interfaces. For example, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) designed an AI cancer classifier by using genetically engineered E. coli to target cancer biomarkers.[71,72] The engineered bacteria provide molecular input data to train an electronic deep learning model for diagnostics. Such hybrids integrate the sensing/processing strengths of both biological and electronic substrates. [73]

Environmental applications include engineering phage viruses that detect pollutant chemicals via colorimetric reactions and cells that luminesce in response to toxins.[74] Plant nanobionics is creating "green computers" by embedding nanomaterials that monitor plant health.

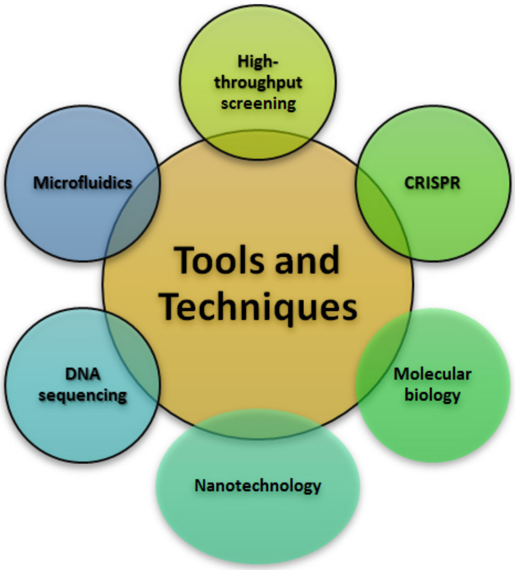

Fig. 1. Tools and Technologies of Bio-computing

On the materials science front, viruses are being engineered to self-assemble into precise 2D and 3D structures for nanoscale fabrication.[75,76]

These examples highlight the diverse real-world promise as interdisciplinary bio computing transcends the lab bench. Ongoing advances in synthetic biology, AI and nanotechnology will further expand the application space and commercial potential.

Challenges and limitations currently facing the field of bio computing

One major challenge is creating biocompatible systems that can integrate and function effectively within biological environments and subjects. Biological tissues present a complex milieu of molecules, cell types and interactions that engineered systems must adapt to.[77,78] Immunogenicity issues can arise whereby implanted bio computing devices trigger unwanted immune reactions. Approaches to improve biocompatibility include biomimetic designs using natural biological materials, bio-inert surface coatings, and localized release of immunosuppressant drugs.[79–81]

Programming and encoding complexity is another hurdle. Engineering robust gene circuits or neural networks requires sophisticated design tools, modeling frameworks, and debugging cycles.[82] Synthetic biology is working to create modular, well-characterized genetic "parts" that can be predictably assembled. Abstraction layers and computer-aided design software also help hide low-level complexity. DNA sequence optimization algorithms assist in filling design specifications.[83,84]

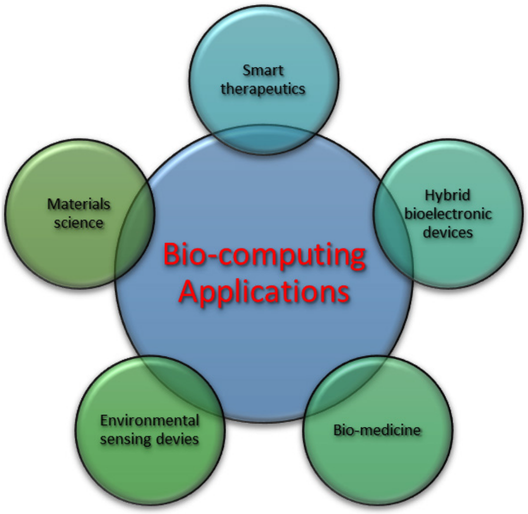

Fig. 2. Bio-computing Applications

Wet lab experimentation remains time-consuming and laborious. Standardizing protocols, automation technology like liquid handling robotics, and foundries for fabrication can relieve workflow bottlenecks.[85,86] Microfluidics miniaturizes experiments onto chips and allows precise environmental control over reactions. High-throughput screening tools test libraries of design variants in parallel.[87,88]

Analysing and characterizing the dynamics of engineered networks is non-trivial. Researchers are devising mathematical models and multi-scale computational simulations to predict system behaviours before costly lab work.[89] Advanced microscopy and "omics" tools facilitate quantitatively tracking molecular mechanisms.[90]

Maintaining the viability of engineered organisms and cells is an issue, as synthetic gene circuits add metabolic load. Strategies like genome streamlining, component optimization for low toxicity, and nutritional feedback controls help improve durability. Decoupling designs into separate survival and task-based modules also helps.[11,12,77,91]

Interfacing engineered systems with the complexity of real-world environments remains challenging. Bio-hybrid interfaces that connect synthetic biology with traditional electronics and hardware are still maturing. Onboard power sources or wireless power delivery are active research areas. Orthogonal communication schemes isolate synthetic systems from natural biological crosstalk.[92,93]

Safety and ethical concerns exist around bio computing applications like human augmentation or environmental release.[94,95] Robust safeguards against unintended effects, molecular containment, and reversible engineering are important areas of investigation. Policy groups also advocate early awareness, monitoring and regulation around such engineering.

While significant hurdles exist, researchers are making steady progress through foundational engineering principles like modularity, model-based design, optimization, and characterization. Continued technology innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration will aid in systematically addressing the challenges on the path ahead.

Future outlook and emerging trends in bio computing

Looking ahead, bio computing is poised to integrate more deeply with fields like artificial intelligence, robotics, and the Internet of Things. One avenue is developing bio-hybrid AI systems, combining biological computing substrates and learning algorithms for perception and inference tasks. Engineered organisms that synthesize their sensors and logic could enable fully autonomous, adaptable biocomputers.[96–98]

Within the body, networks of engineered cells may one day run physiological regulation and repair routines like biological robots. In-vivo biocomputers could monitor organ health and coordinate therapeutic responses, forming a distributed treatment system. Nano-bioelectronics will miniaturize bio/organic interfaces for seamless integration. Implanted neural lace devices could allow direct brain-computer communication.[12,91,99]

DNA digital data storage is emerging as an ultra-dense, stable alternative to silicon memory. Entire datasets, books and videos have been encoded as DNA sequences. Integrating DNA memory with biological processors will enable storing and accessing massive information troves for AI. DNA could also allow on-chip training of nanoscale neural nets.[100,101]

Cell-free synthetic biology promises to expand bio manufacturing capabilities beyond living organisms. Printing hybrid bio-electronic materials containing engineered proteins and nucleic acids may support wearable, self-repairing soft robotics for human augmentation. Bio computing could thus distribute "enhanced intelligence" ubiquitously via engineered biomaterials.[102,103]

Self-organizing cellular systems that reshape and reconfigure on command will lead to programmable, morphing biohybrid materials for drug delivery or tissue engineering. Viral engineering for nanofabrication will create manufacturing platforms integrating top-down and bottom-up processes. Bio computing could thereby revolutionize digital fabrication, smart materials, and sustainable manufacturing.[104–106]

Protecting privacy and security of biometric data will be crucial as human-machine biointerfaces become intimate and pervasive. Ethical guidelines must shape applications for human improvement versus entrenching inequity. Overall, bio computing could fundamentally reshape our information infrastructure - while navigating immense opportunities and challenges along the way. Interdisciplinary collaboration, public awareness and appropriate regulations will help guide responsible progress.[107,108]

Ethical considerations and issues surrounding bio computing

As with any powerful technology, bio computing carries risks of misuse along with immense potential for benefit. A major concern is the dual-use potential - capabilities meant for good could also be coopted for harmful use by malign actors. For instance, technologies for rapid vaccine development using synthetic biology could be misdirected towards engineering viral bioweapons. Strict biosafety measures and oversight are necessary to prevent misuse.[109–112]

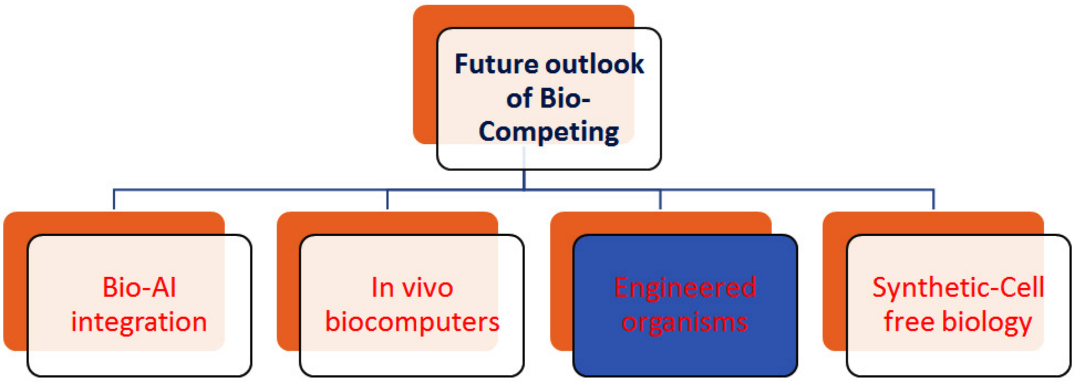

Fig. 3. Future outlook of Bio-computing

Augmenting human abilities via neural implants or genetic engineering raises important ethical questions about human dignity, consent, and identity. Policy groups advocate for precautionary, step-wise integration of human enhancement technologies with ongoing ethical review. Access equality is also an issue - such technologies could widen social disparities if only accessible to the wealthy. [113–115]

Applications like engineered viruses for nanofabrication or environmental remediation carry risks of unintended ecological impacts. Containment systems that prevent uncontrolled proliferation in the environment are critical. Tracking and recovery mechanisms should be incorporated as safeguards.[116,117]

Protecting the privacy of biological data like genomic profiles in biocomputing systems is imperative, given the sensitivity of such data. Techniques like data encryption, access controls and consent policies help secure users against violations of informational privacy. [118]

Broader societal impacts also need consideration. Emerging biotechnologies could disrupt economic sectors reliant on conventional manufacturing, agriculture, medicine etc. Policy foresight and planning will be essential to manage disruptions and harness benefits. Bio computing may only reach its full potential through open, inclusive public dialogue around hopes, concerns and what constitutes responsible development.[119]

Researchers are taking proactive steps to address ethical bio computing - calling for guidelines, risk assessments, red teams, codes of conduct, external oversight bodies and multidisciplinary perspectives. With diligent, ethical foundations guiding its progress, bio computing can usher in humanity's next era of technological flourishing.[120–122]

CONCLUSION

In summary, this review has explored the emergence of bio computing, the interdisciplinary pursuit of harnessing biological substrates like DNA, proteins and cells for information processing and computation. We examined pioneering approaches like DNA computing, which leverages parallel molecular reactions to solve problems. Synthetic gene circuits and gene editing tools enable reprogramming cells into adaptive biocomputers. Protein engineering can construct molecular logic gates and communication circuits. Neural networks build on understandings of biological brains for machine learning.

These biomolecular and bio-inspired techniques showcase nature's computational capabilities and offer alternatives to conventional silicon computers. However, significant challenges remain around biocompatibility, complexity, testing rigors and responsible development concerns. Prudent nurturing is vital to bridge the gap from tantalizing potential to real-world impact.

Looking forward, bio computing could transform application domains from biomedicine to smart materials, if key technical hurdles are overcome. This requires sustaining rigorous collaborative efforts across disciplines and emphasizing ethical stewardship. In summary, bio computing represents an auspicious convergence of biology and technology, unlocking new computational frontiers by interfacing silicon with carbon-based substrates. The decades ahead will prove pivotal in carefully charting this biology-technology frontier.

At its core, bio computing signals a conceptual fusion between the ancient programming inherent in life's machinery and human engineering of biological systems. This field warrants enthusiastic nurturing to gently integrate engineered constructs within biological environments, opening new eras of flourishing. With diligent efforts, bio-inspired computation may someday emulate nature's sophistication, ushering an organic computational age that advances humanity's condition while stewarding all life.

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Conflicts of Interest

Our research and findings are driven solely by scientific merit and integrity, without any competing interests.

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