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# On the use of simulation in robotics: opportunities, challenges, and suggestions for moving forward

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1 **The last five years marked a surge in interest for and use of smart**  
2 **robots, which operate in dynamic and unstructured environments**  
3 **and might interact with humans. We posit that well-validated com-**  
4 **puter simulation can provide a virtual proving ground that in many**  
5 **cases is instrumental in understanding safely, faster, at lower costs,**  
6 **and more thoroughly how the robots of the future should be de-**  
7 **signed and controlled for safe operation and improved performance.**  
8 **Against this backdrop, we discuss how simulation can help in**  
9 **robotics, barriers that currently prevent its broad adoption, and po-**  
10 **tential steps that can eliminate some of these barriers. The points**  
11 **and recommendations made concern the following simulation-in-**  
12 **robotics aspects: simulation of the dynamics of the robot; simulation**  
13 **of the virtual world; simulation of the sensing of this virtual world;**  
14 **simulation of the interaction between the human and the robot; and,**  
15 **in less depth, simulation of the communication between robots. This**  
16 **perspectives contribution summarizes the points of view that coa-**  
17 **lesced during a 2018 National Science Foundation/Department of**  
18 **Defense/National Institute for Standards and Technology workshop**  
19 **dedicated to the topic of hand. The meeting brought together par-**  
20 **ticipants from a range of organizations, disciplines, and application**  
21 **fields, with expertise at the intersection of robotics, machine learn-**  
22 **ing, and physics-based simulation.**

Robotics | Simulation | Design | Controls | Machine Learning

1 Robots are no longer stiff/rigid implements operating in  
2 the structured environment of assembly lines and performing  
3 scripted and limited sets of operations. Emerging artificial  
4 intelligence techniques will endow the next generation of robots  
5 with mobility and decision-making skills. These robots will  
6 be flexible, reconfigurable, interact with humans and operate  
7 in environments that are unstructured, uncertain and rapidly  
8 changing in time. It is expected of them to assume new roles  
9 such as operating on highways as autonomous vehicles, in  
10 nursing homes assisting social workers, in schools tutoring  
11 young learners, underwater managing oil spills, in the adverse  
12 and cluttered environments of search-and-rescue missions, or  
13 remotely performing surgeries. While physically testing these  
14 robots before deployment is mandatory, through simulation,  
15 the engineering design process can be accelerated, made more  
16 cost effective, and benefit from more thorough testing.

This manuscript is a reflection of ideas, observations and  
suggestions that emerged during a one-day workshop on the  
topic of using simulation in robotics (1). A word cloud based  
on participant input is shown in Fig. 1. This participant input,  
in raw form and organized in anonymized decks of slides, is  
available online (2). The hope is that this document, which  
provides a synthesis of the input contributed by the workshop  
participants, becomes a useful reference, resource, and call-to-  
arms for colleagues from the simulation community interested  
in applying their expertise in the rapidly evolving field of  
smart robotics. To that end, this contribution seeks to identify  
opportunities, point out challenges, and suggest possible next  
steps vis-à-vis the goal of increasing the role that computer  
simulation plays in smart robotics.

The manuscript is organized in three parts. The first sum-  
marizes benefits that simulation could deliver upon its use  
in designing robots over the next decade; i.e., near-term. A  
subsequent section points out several hurdles that hinder the  
wide use of simulation in practice. Lastly, we identify steps be-  
lieved to accelerate the near-term role that simulation plays in  
robotics. The intent was to generate a snapshot that captures  
this group’s perspective on the potential, hurdles, and path  
forward for the simulation-in-robotics idea. This contribution  
is not a review of the simulation-in-robotics literature; refer-  
ences were used sparingly to point the reader to contributions  
that further elaborate on ideas that were only briefly stated in  
this manuscript and, where necessary, to provide a historical  
perspective on the topic at hand. We purposely maintained a  
short reference list, dictated by publication length constraints  
and the stated purpose of this manuscript – to provide a “per-  
spectives” opinion rather than a review of the state of the  
art.

## How simulation is, or could be useful in robotics

Ideas embedded in pre-workshop contributions (1) and further  
discussions during the joint meeting brought into focus several  
simulation opportunities in robotics:

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118 of autonomous robotic systems that learn on-line are essen- 179  
119 tially non-existent. Repeatability, particularly with respect 180  
120 to stress/corner cases; full control of the experiment insofar 181  
121 as the “environment” is concerned; and the lack of risk to 182  
122 human and hardware damage are three attributes that can 183  
123 make simulation instrumental in establishing principled pro- 184  
124 tocols for autonomous system verification and, by extension, 185  
125 industry standards and guidelines. Against this backdrop, 186  
126 as autonomous systems cannot foresee unknowns that they 187  
127 may encounter, novel formal verification schemes can be devel- 188  
128 oped to verify specifications such as safety in real-time under 189  
129 assumed uncertainty in the system and its environment (11).

130 Simulation can play an important role in providing insights 190  
131 into multi-robot, collaborative scenarios (12, 13). Collabo- 191  
132 rative, multi-robot systems can exclusively comprise robots 192  
133 interacting with each other based on their own local decision- 193  
134 making algorithms that factor in sensed and/or shared infor- 194  
135 mation; or, can include human interaction as in, for instance, 195  
136 search and rescue scenarios. As the number of robot-robot 196  
137 and/or human-robot interactions increases, so does the com- 197  
138 plexity of designing and verifying these systems. Physical 198  
139 testing and verification are daunting as the collection of sce- 199  
140 narios to probe increases quadratically with the number of 200  
141 agents in the system. Moreover, it is difficult to systematically 201  
142 test in real conditions multi-robot systems used, for instance, 202  
143 in environmental monitoring, off-road mobility/survivability, 203  
144 surveillance or infrastructure management, etc., due in part to 204  
145 the stiff challenges posed by operating groups of agents in such 205  
146 environments. Simulation is very convenient in such scenarios, 206  
147 given that it can also be used to probe for inter-agent connectiv- 207  
148 ity failure or hostile network penetration. **Hostile/adversarial 208**  
149 **attacks aim at more than multi-robot network penetration – 209**  
150 **the robot’s control stack and sensing system are two other 210**  
151 **targets (14). One of the most compelling cases for use of 211**  
152 **simulation in robotics can be made in conjunction with the 212**  
153 **need to thoroughly check the consequence of such attacks. Do 213**  
154 **the checks designed to guard against adversarial attacks work 214**  
155 **as expected? What is a safe way to counteract an adversarial 215**  
156 **attack? The answer to these and similar questions is critical 216**  
157 **for safety and regulatory purposes yet direct hardware testing 217**  
158 **is costly and potentially unsafe (bulky robots gone awry can 218**  
159 **become outright dangerous). Simulating the response of the 219**  
160 **robotic system in cases of failure, while potentially performing 220**  
161 **a task, permits the investigation of fail-safe strategies for the 221**  
162 **system as well as the design of security, anti-breach policies. 222**  
163 **Without simulation, one is limited in what and how many 223**  
164 **scenarios can be tested. 224**

165 **Opp.4. Facilitate the development of more intelligent 225**  
166 **robots. In this argument, the intelligence metric is tied to 226**  
167 **the breadth of scenarios in which the robot is expected to 227**  
168 **successfully fulfill a set mission. By this metric, industrial 228**  
169 **robots are at one end of the spectrum. They operate in very 229**  
170 **structured and static environments (known ahead of time) 230**  
171 **and are trained to perform a narrow and a priori established 231**  
172 **catalog of operations. The opportunity to develop more intelli- 232**  
173 **gent robots is a consequence of several technological advances: 233**  
174 **machine learning techniques opened the door to new control 234**  
175 **policies (3); the compute speeds available on an affordable 235**  
176 **power budget have increased substantially; sensing is sharper 236**  
177 **and more affordable; actuation is gradually becoming more so- 237**  
178 **phisticated; low latency communication/networking and edge**

computing allow for real-time, just-in-time off-loading of heavy-  
duty computation during operation. Against this backdrop,  
simulation can be a catalyst for the next stage in the evolution  
of smart robots, one in which they operate in unstructured  
environments and engage in decision-making activities. Just  
as the concepts of morality (set rules), prior experience and  
ability to predict the consequence of one’s actions shape the  
decision-making process in humans, a set of rules (includ-  
ing ethical) and an ability to predict consequences/outcomes  
through on-line simulation can shape the decision-making pro-  
cess of robots through introspection (15). A rule that states  
“plates shall not drop on the floor” combined with the ability to  
run thousands of parallel simulation scenarios faster than real  
time should determine the robot to place on a table the plate  
at the top of the stack that it carries rather than one from  
somewhere in the middle of the stack. **The ability to foresee**  
**on-line the outcome of a possible action through the lens of**  
**simulation is anchored by spectacular gains in computation**  
**speed. For instance, recent GPU cards can manage the simul-**  
**aneous execution of more than 150,000 computing threads**  
**(16). With simple enough simulation kernels, this translates**  
**into peeking into the future via as many possible scenarios,**  
**leading to introspective control policies that complement the**  
**established model predictive control approach and more recent**  
**techniques that rely on on/off-line machine learning solutions**  
**(17).**

**Opp.5. Facilitate the understanding of human-robot**  
**interactions (HRI). The ability to simulate the interaction**  
**between the robot and human opens the door to experimen-**  
**tation with tele-surgical robotics in semi-autonomous or au-**  
**tonomous operation; reducing risks to individuals in dangerous**  
**work environments or working in cooperation with collabor-**  
**ative and mobile robots in a shared workplace; eliminating**  
**or reducing repetitive motion trauma and musculoskeletal**  
**overload; reducing fatalities and injuries from motor vehicle**  
**incidents as autonomous vehicles are yet another form in which**  
**robots interact with humans. The human-robot interplay can**  
**project specialized medical expertise and care to any point**  
**of need, at any time. This is of particular interest for teams**  
**operating remotely, e.g., small teams of first responders, teams**  
**of astronauts, etc. Finally, one important facet of the science**  
**of HRI pertains to the aspect of establishing trust between hu-**  
**man and robot in shared decision-making (18). Development**  
**of simulation tools that better represent the psycho-social**  
**nature of HRI and enable a common operating “picture” of**  
**possible solution sets for decision-making may foster trust and**  
**establish a baseline for more effective collaboration (19).**

## Barriers to the use of simulation in robotics

This section summarizes issues that, to various degrees, limit  
the role played by simulation in robotics. A noncomprehensive  
list of open problems vis-à-vis the topic at hand includes the  
following:

1. **Scarcity of solutions; producing a simulation platform for**  
**robotics requires broad multi-disciplinary expertise and**  
**sustained software development commitment**
2. **Existing modeling languages are immature at a time when**  
**a robotics simulation ontology is only slowly emerging**
3. **Model composability needs further improvements**
4. Simulation is not fast enough



- 238 5. Uncertainty is marginally handled
- 239 6. Model calibration can be tedious
- 240 7. Data-driven approaches (surrogate models; replacing sim- 300
- 241 ulation with an oracle) are only slowly emerging 301
- 242 8. Difficulties in gauging the needed level of model complex- 302
- 243 ity 303
- 244 9. Handling the human-robot interaction 304

245 **Issue 1. Scarcity of solutions; producing a simu- 305**  
246 **lation platform for robotics requires broad multi- 306**  
247 **disciplinary expertise and sustained software devel- 307**  
248 **opment commitment.** After an evolution that spanned 308  
249 decades, Computer Aided Engineering (CAE); i.e., the use of 309  
250 computer simulation in customary engineering, has become 310  
251 a linchpin in the design process. For instance, one can carry 311  
252 out a highly predictive finite element analysis of an engine 312  
253 crank shaft or of an airplane wing to accurately identify vi- 313  
254 bration/flutter modes. Likewise, a vehicle ride analysis can 314  
255 be performed via a dynamics simulation in which a vehi- 315  
256 cle operating on a flat, rigid surface follows a sequence of 316  
257 driving maneuvers to collect information for a subsequent 317  
258 noise/vibration/harshness analysis. Compared to what a CAE 318  
259 simulation looks like today, simulation in robotics is less struc- 319  
260 tured and vastly more multi-disciplinary. The “less structured” 320  
261 attribute is tied to the observation that a relatively simple 321  
262 set of boundary conditions and load functions are enough to 322  
263 define the backdrop for a CAE-type analysis. In robotics, the 323  
264 backdrop is more complex and uncertain, and thus harder to 324  
265 define. For instance, the robot can operate in and interact 325  
266 with an unstructured and evolving world; or a human can be 326  
267 part of the equation. The “multi-disciplinary” attribute is 327  
268 a consequence of the fact that for simulation in robotics, in 328  
269 addition to producing models for robot dynamics, which is in 329  
270 the purview of CAE, one has to engage in non-CAE tasks, e.g., 330  
271 bring in sensor simulation required for agent control; represent 331  
272 in high fidelity the unstructured environment surrounding the 332  
273 robot (this virtual world might have to be itself simulated 333  
274 since its state can be influenced by the robot dynamics, e.g., 334  
275 rover changing the world by creating deep ruts that must be 335  
276 captured by the camera sensor of a following rover); simulate 336  
277 the human dimension in HRI; and, simulate agent-to-agent or 337  
278 agent-to-infrastructure communication. These *simulator sub-* 338  
279 *components*, which are tied to the dynamics, sensing, virtual 339  
280 world, human participation, and communication facets render 340  
281 the simulation-in-robotics task highly multi-disciplinary. As 341  
282 an example, consider sensor simulation – it alone calls for 342  
283 knowledge in several disciplines as robotics applications rely 343  
284 on multiple classes of sensors, e.g., GPS, IMU, LiDAR, camera, 344  
285 radar, thermal, etc., each drawing on vastly different physics 345  
286 for characterizing the sensing paradigms that come into play. 346  
287 Finally, one has to integrate these subcomponents and turn the 347  
288 sum of the parts into an usable simulation platform, a process 348  
289 that adds a software engineering facet to the multi-disciplinary 349  
290 nature of the task at hand. 350

291 **Issue 2. Existing modeling languages are immature at 351**  
292 **a time when a robotics simulation ontology is only 352**  
293 **slowly emerging.** Specifying/defining/setting up a *scenario 353*  
294 *model* for simulation in robotics can be daunting. Indeed, one 354  
295 has to specify a slew of parameters that define the geometry 355  
296 of the robot, its kinematics, loads, actuators, sensor package 356  
297 information, the virtual world it operates in (weather, time of 357

day, satellite position, terrain properties, etc.), communication 298  
types and protocols, control policy type, etc. The scenario 299  
modeling abstractions that are needed should be conducive to 300  
yielding models with hierarchical structure that accommodate 301  
the user’s requirements vis-à-vis the level of fidelity rendered 302  
in simulation – from less accurate but expeditious, to highly de- 303  
tailed/accurate but computationally more demanding. Gazebo 304  
(20, 21) has made good strides in this direction, continuing in 305  
the tradition of previous tools like USARSim (22). However, 306  
the ontology associated with Gazebo’s modeling approach and 307  
other similar efforts (23) is limited in scope. Dwelling on the 308  
Gazebo example, the platform exposes one simulation interface 309  
to several engines: ODE (24), Bullet (25), DART (26), and 310  
Simbody (27). Presently, the Gazebo simulation-in-robotics 311  
ontology does not include concepts such as “fluid viscosity”, 312  
“material dissipation model”, “soil plasticity”, “Drucker-Prager 313  
yield”, etc. since none of the Gazebo-exposed physics engines 314  
supports fluid dynamics, plasticity in soils, finite element an- 315  
lysis, etc. There are simulation engines that have started to 316  
support multi-physics with various degrees of success (28, 29) 317  
yet these engines presently come short on exposing robotics- 318  
focused modeling abstractions. In moving forward, lessons can 319  
be learned from software platforms used to create computer 320  
games (28, 30, 31). These video gaming platforms are used 321  
with good success by several robotics simulation engines, e.g., 322  
(22, 32, 33) to create complex virtual worlds with visually 323  
appealing graphics. However, the gaming platforms are not 324  
designed to accurately simulate the physics governing the be- 325  
havior of robots and their interactions with the environment. 326  
Consequently, their predictive attributes are limited owing to 327  
an emphasis on plausibility rather than accuracy. 328

329 **Issue 3. Model composability needs further improve- 329**  
330 **ments.** A rich universe opens up when multiple agents par- 330  
331 ticipate in the same scenario, see, for instance (34). Com- 331  
332 posability refers to the ability to combine, LEGO style, basic 332  
333 constructs/sub-models into complex simulation scenarios. In 333  
334 this approach, complex scenarios are investigated via composed 334  
335 models that draw on validated, discipline-oriented, sub-models. 335  
336 This calls for more than just the ability to build on a hierar- 336  
337 chical representation of a model. Indeed, there is an interplay 337  
338 at run-time between these sub-components that takes place in 338  
339 the presence of dynamic (evolving) environments and human 339  
340 participation. For instance, the sub-models communicate with 340  
341 each other (agent-to-agent, agent-to-infrastructure, etc.) and 341  
342 interact with each other through contact, friction, visual or 342  
343 auditory cues, etc. These aspects need to be supported in a 343  
344 physics-based fashion by the simulation engine, and this is 344  
345 what makes this composability problem more than a “model 345  
346 representation”; i.e., a pre-processing, problem. One additional 346  
347 layer of complexity comes into play if a real time constraint 347  
348 must be met for scenarios that include numerous robots. Com- 348  
349 posability with scalability typically calls for simulators that 349  
350 rely on parallel computing, which further complicates the prob- 350  
351 lem at hand due to time and space coherence requirements 351  
352 – robots should propagate their dynamics in the same world 352  
353 time and be able to sense each other although they might run 353  
354 on different hardware assets linked through a fast interconnect 354  
355 fabric. There are several sources of inspiration for handling 355  
356 composability, e.g., V-REP (23), which embraces composabil- 356  
357 ity yet has other limitations in terms of breadth of physics 357  
358 simulated. Similarly, there are computer aided design (CAD)- 358

359 to-dynamics modeling pipelines (which leverage, for instance, 420  
360 SolidWorks or MATLAB), and video gaming-based solutions 421  
361 that can lighten the burden of reaching composability with 422  
362 scalability. Indeed, the game community has established so- 423  
363 phisticated game authoring tools that implicitly handle model 424  
364 composability. On the down side, they are massive chunks 425  
365 of code, cumbersome to work with and, as pointed out in 426  
366 Issue 2, only partially cover the robotics community’s needs 427  
367 owing to emphasizing credibility-in-appearance rather than  
368 accuracy-in-results.

369 **Issue 4. Simulation is not fast enough.** Robotics simu- 428  
370 lation is customarily used for mechanical design or control 429  
371 purposes. In controls, the simulations should run fast, in fact, 430  
372 faster than real-time for model predictive control or on-line 431  
373 policy inference (while not ideal, slower than real time perfor- 432  
374 mance is acceptable for off-line policy inference often times 433  
375 employed in Machine Learning ). Presently, by and large, robot 434  
376 models that only use rigid bodies run in real-time as long as the 435  
377 number of bodies is in the neighborhood of 10-15 and the num- 436  
378 ber of collisions with friction and contact is low (25, 35, 36). 437  
379 However, the real-time constraint is daunting for models that 438  
380 contain flexible/soft/deformable components and/or numerous 439  
381 contacts with friction. An additional and sizable simulation 440  
382 slow down is associated with scenarios that include unstruc- 441  
383 tured and changing environments, e.g., deformable terrain, 442  
384 cluttered environments, fluid-solid interaction, etc. Bringing 443  
385 this type of physics into the model is important when robots 444  
386 venture outside controlled environments and operate in com- 445  
387 plex real world scenarios. Depending on the goal pursued; 446  
388 i.e., mechanical design vs. controls, managing the simulation 447  
389 time calls for compromises, e.g., reduced number of iterations 448  
390 in a numerical algorithm, a coarser mesh for collision detec- 449  
391 tion, use of rigid instead of deformable terrain, reliance on 450  
392 more rudimentary sensing, use of rigid instead of compliant 451  
393 elements, 2D instead of 3D dynamics, model reduction, etc. 452  
394 Note that the nature of this compromise also depends on the 453  
395 computing power available, which is markedly different for off- 454  
396 line and on-line simulation. Indeed, a complex model can run 455  
397 real-time in a mechanical design analysis, when one relies on 456  
398 power-hungry hardware such as GPUs, only to run too slowly 457  
399 in an on-line setup where weight and/or power constraints 458  
400 limit the compute hardware options.

401 **Issue 5. Uncertainty is marginally handled.** Friction, im- 459  
402 pact, contact, actuator noise, wear and tear, uncertain external 460  
403 loads, complex and unstructured environments, etc., are a few 461  
404 of the many sources of uncertainty that mar the operation of 462  
405 a robot. These sources of uncertainty must also be present in 463  
406 simulation. The uncertainties encountered are both aleatory 464  
407 (due, for instance, to the complexity of the dynamic response 465  
408 in the presence of friction and contact phenomena (37)) and 466  
409 epistemic (e.g., unknown simulation parameters for a selected 467  
410 model for friction, e.g., Coulomb friction (38)). Accounting 468  
411 for uncertainty must be done during both model generation 469  
412 and simulation phases. In model set up, one has to provide 470  
413 mechanisms to inject uncertainty in the model, e.g., allowing 471  
414 the friction coefficient to change in a deformable and hetero- 472  
415 geneous terrain; the geometry of various components to be 473  
416 less than perfect; the actuation forces/torques to display de- 474  
417 lays, etc. In running simulations, one has to robustly handle 475  
418 lack of smoothness associated with the solution of the robot 476  
419 dynamics, e.g., stick-slip conditions, impact, control policies 477

420 that are nonsmooth, event-triggered changes that occur spo- 421  
422 radically to suddenly change loads or boundary conditions, 423  
424 etc. A perspective that might be useful is a statistical one, in 425  
426 which confidence bounds gauge the extent to which one can 427  
428 rely on simulation results (39). This uncertainty quantification  
429 mindset is pivotal, since robots will often times have limited  
430 knowledge about the environment they operate in and stimuli  
431 they are subject to.

432 **Issue 6. Model calibration can be tedious.** Populating a 433  
434 model with correct parameters is time consuming and most 435  
436 often an ad-hoc, one-off, process. Pragmatically speaking, the 437  
438 goal is to do predictive analysis, not to find parameters for 439  
440 a model. This observation explains why this topic receives 441  
442 less attention than the task of generating the model, which 443  
444 nonetheless is populated with these very parameters that ul- 445  
446 timately dictate its quality. When experimental data for the 446  
447 robot is available, classical identification methods are effective 448  
449 provided the parameter space is not large (40). Unfortunately, 449  
450 at design phase, robots exist only as CAD drafts yet to be in- 450  
451 stantiated in reality; as such, experimental data is unavailable. 451  
452 Even when the robots exist, experimental data for calibration 452  
453 might be hard to procure. For instance, friction and 453  
454 contact simulation for rigid-wheel/deformable-terrain interac- 454  
455 tion requires more than 10 parameters, which are typically 455  
456 determined through a bevameter test carried out in the field 456  
457 (41). Although the rover might exist, experimental data for 457  
458 Martian soil is very limited and a bevameter test is out of ques- 458  
459 tion. Recent efforts aimed at simplifying calibration rely on 459  
460 Machine Learning and other statistical approaches to employ 460  
461 iterative processes that automate what remains a labor and 461  
462 time intensive process (6, 42, 43). For large parameter sets, 462  
463 brute force approaches can leverage powerful processors to 463  
464 perform statistically guided extensive searches for parameter 464  
465 values, see, for instance, (44). 465

466 **Issue 7. Data-driven approaches (surrogate models; 466  
467 replacing simulation with an oracle) are only slowly 467  
468 emerging.** The standardization of robotic platforms open 468  
469 the possibility to collect large amounts of data (sometimes pro- 469  
470 vided by the manufacturer) in real world scenarios that could 470  
471 be leveraged by Machine Learning techniques to build predic- 471  
472 tive models directly from data (8). The hope is that using 472  
473 statistical learning techniques, one could bypass simulation- 473  
474 specific hurdles such as model generation and calibration by 474  
475 constructing “oracles” that are able to predict the next system 475  
476 state given its current one. The outcome of a data-driven ap- 476  
477 proach might not be a complete elimination of the simulation. 477  
478 The approach could be used to methodically reduce model 478  
479 (and therefore computational) complexity through systematic 479  
480 dimensional reduction and/or model compression (45, 46). 480  
481 However, the data-driven approaches in robotics simulation 481  
482 are in their infancy and principled methodologies to design 482  
483 and validate data-driven models remain to be identified. In 483  
484 addressing the issue at hand, one is faced with the practi- 484  
485 cal challenge of developing realistic use cases and generating 485  
486 enough data to represent “truth” or “reality.” This is not a 486  
487 trivial task. For instance, what types of data, problems, and 487  
488 level of authenticity are required to better capture and model 488  
489 the socio-physical characteristics of human-robot interaction 489  
490 scenarios? Note that in producing these surrogate models, one 490  
491 can substitute experimental data with simulator-generated 491  
492 data. Indeed, if a simulator and a model exist, the data pro- 492

duced by the simulator-model combo, just like experimental data, can be used to produce an “oracle” that within a controlled set of regimes can yield results close to those produced in simulation. In other words, the simulator provides the data that leads to its obsolescence.

**Issue 8. Difficulties in gauging the needed level of model complexity.** Complex models set up to produce highly accurate results most often lead to long run times and require a wealth of model parameters. It is not uncommon that lack of good parameters in these models leads to worse results that take longer to produce than what can be obtained using simpler models. Likewise, debugging complex models is time consuming since it is difficult to discern whether sub-par results are due to poor model parameters or to weaknesses in the modeling and numerical solution techniques anchoring the simulator. Against this backdrop, there is lack of consensus regarding when complex models are needed; i.e., at what point a model confines our ability to discover through simulation. For instance, in Machine Learning, sophisticated models are expected to better negotiate the simulation-to-reality gap; i.e., to yield simulation-learned control policies that work well on the real robot (4). Recent results show though that this gap can be successfully negotiated learning with simple models. In a “domain randomization” approach, simple and therefore expeditious models are repeatedly used to canvas broad model parameter spaces via expeditious simulation to improve control policy robustness (5). Unfortunately, this example cannot be generalized and one should be cognizant of the fact that validated simulation tools serve multiple end goals – human-in-the-loop simulation, the designing of better control policies, improving mechanical performance, auditing for safety purposes, etc. This suggests that diversity in the level of model complexity is inevitable and the practitioner has to rely on past experience, understanding of the real world problem, and knowledge of the simulation tool to make the right call insofar as the needed level of complexity in the model is concerned. Choosing a simple model for a complex problem might produce misleading results; conversely, choosing too complex of a model for a simple problem might take an unreasonable amount of effort to set up and lead to prohibitively long simulations times. These are two outcomes that each can discredit the idea of using simulation in robotics; they can also be used to make a case that simulation in robotics is part science and part practice.

**Issue 9. Handling the human-robot interaction.** One conspicuous challenge in HRI simulation is tied to the speed of execution: the robot simulation should be fast enough to support real-time interaction between the human and the robot model (human-in-the-loop simulation). This poses several challenges, see Issue 4. Speed of execution ceases to be a matter of concern if there is no actual human in the loop; i.e., the human component is simulated as well. Indeed, in robot training, the human is replaced with an avatar endowed with the same traits that the human would display in his/her interaction with the robot. Creating avatars is as difficult as humans are diverse, each person a unique and complex web of intertwined physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and psychological threads. Numerous empirical models have been created to abstract human behavior in robotics and virtual reality (47). Ideally, the wisdom and insights that these studies have yielded would be aggregated in priors for mathematical

models. This would mark a departure from today’s empiricism in human modeling in robotics and represent a step towards the adoption of statistical models of the human in HRI tasks. While progress has been reported in capturing mechanistic traits in HRI, e.g., models for the mechanics of the human body insofar as simulating surgery procedures is concerned (48, 49), numerous questions remain unanswered in relation to abstracting in mathematical models the psychological underpinnings that trigger in humans states of anxiety, fear, comfort, stress, etc. In this context, the ability to control and display emotions in avatars represents a prerequisite for endowing smart robots with a sense of empathy in their interaction with humans (50).

### Suggested steps for making simulation more useful in robotics

The next two subsections summarize, respectively, recommendations and high-vantage-point observations that emerged at the conclusion of the simulation-in-robotics workshop.

**A. “Nuts-and-bolts” recommendations.** The recommendations below are made for a generic agency that considers making investments in the simulation-in-robotics area while the agency is at the stage of assembling a call for proposals. The recommendations could also be informative to someone who contemplates becoming involved in the research and development effort associated with the simulation-in-robotics topic. The list is not comprehensive; it only compiles several initiatives deemed as of higher priority.

1. Foster the development and validation of open source simulation platforms
2. Foster efforts that seek to establish open and community curated libraries of validated models
3. Organize several simulation-in-robotics grand challenge competitions
4. Encourage efforts that seek to characterize the human-robot interaction
5. Encourage simulation solutions for soft robotics
6. Emphasize use of emerging hardware architectures

**Rec. 1. Foster the development and validation of open source simulation platforms.** A robust and feature-rich set of four or five simulation tools available in the open-source domain is critical to advancing the state of the art in robotics. Validated open source platforms democratize the simulation-in-robotics effort and inspire/inform future, more refined open-source or commercial efforts. Trusted open source solutions are quickly embraced; support the idea of reproducibility/verifiability in science; and have the side effect of immediately raising the bar for the commercial tools, which must necessarily up the ante. Owing to the breadth of robotics applications, it is likely that no single platform will emerge as the solution of choice for all targeted simulation scenarios, which provides the rationale for the “four or five simulation platforms” recommendation above.

**Rec. 2. Foster efforts that seek to establish open and community curated libraries of validated models.** Customarily, simulation in robotics calls for the interplay of three types of sub-models: robots, synthetic worlds, and sensors. In some cases, the human component comes into play, and, for



599 multi-robot scenarios, one might need to simulate the commu- 600  
601 nication layer. Any one of these sub-models is complex, both  
602 to generate and endow with meaningful parameters, see Issue  
603 6. With an eye towards scenario composability, it would be  
604 useful and impactful to establish a set of freely available, ready-  
605 to-go *scenario* models that build off existing robot/virtual  
606 world/sensor/humans/communication sub-models. Establish-  
607 ing model libraries is an arduous and long process that has  
608 one prerequisite: the community must coalesce around a mod-  
609 eling approach and ontology. The Unified Robot Description  
610 Format (URDF) (51) represents an early step in this direction,  
611 yet its modeling schema remains to be endowed with addi-  
612 tional modeling elements. **The existence of a rich and broadly  
613 adopted modeling language and model library will have the  
614 side benefit of providing an incentive for the manufacturers  
615 to augment these libraries with validated models associated  
616 with their robotics solutions. Finally, it is also imperative to  
617 identify new ways in which models can be validated. Fresh  
618 perspectives are needed in this regard, particularly when the  
619 robots simulated have not yet been realized (52).**

619 **Rec. 3. Organize several simulation-in-robotics grand  
620 challenge competitions.** Over the next decade, the commu-  
621 nity would benefit from a sequence of four or five grand  
622 challenge competitions. Run as a sequence, perhaps two years  
623 apart and akin to the 2013 DARPA’s Virtual Robotics Chal-  
624 lenge (53), these competitions could pay dividends in several  
625 ways. First, carefully chosen challenge themes would focus  
626 the community effort. Without direction and clear purpose,  
627 the community can choose to focus limited resources along  
628 technical thrusts of secondary relevance. Second, a set of well-  
629 chosen challenge themes would be a catalyst for cross-discipline  
630 collaboration. The current robotics simulation gaps are best  
631 addressed by multi-disciplinary teams, combining model de-  
632 velopers and model users, particularly when the latter have  
633 expertise in physical testing. **Third, such an effort will kindle  
634 and foster an ecosystem build-up effort to produce the meth-  
635 ods, tools, models, and validation metrics of the trade. Fourth,  
636 this effort will likely produce a catalog of reliable simulation  
637 platforms available, as well as a community sanctioned set of  
638 recommendations that indicates which tool works well in what  
639 scenarios. Lastly, it is highly likely that these competitions will  
640 attract a lot public interest, which bodes well for promoting  
641 the field and getting the attention of tomorrow’s roboticists.**

642 **Rec. 4. Encourage efforts that seek to characterize  
643 the human-robot interaction.** The issue of establishing  
644 human models that capture mechanical attributes of the body  
645 and/or psychological and cognitive traits of human behav-  
646 ior is cross-cutting. Applications in which HRI will come  
647 into play include robotic surgery, which is relevant in surgery  
648 training and remotely treating patients in remote/disaster  
649 zones; assisting seniors with tasks such as dressing, personal  
650 hygiene, cleaning and cooking; assisting individuals with lim-  
651 ited ambulatory ability with transportation needs, etc. The  
652 body of work in the area of HRI modeling is meager, which  
653 explains the limited knowledge vis-à-vis the issue of human  
654 cognitive performance in HRI. In this context, there is a very  
655 limited set of science-based requirements and thresholds for  
656 safe human-robot interaction.

657 **Rec. 5. Encourage simulation solutions for soft  
658 robotics.** To date, robotics simulation has almost exclu-

sively drawn on rigid body dynamics. Indeed, the underlying 659  
660 modeling is simpler, the software implementation effort is more  
661 reasonable, and the simulation run-times are shorter. **Looking  
662 ahead, support for soft robotics is critical in several fields, e.g.,  
663 HRI and biomimetic robots.** It is anticipated that embracing  
664 compliance in the robotics models will elicit new approaches to  
665 handling frictional contact with the potential benefit of allevi-  
666 ating numerical artifacts/paradoxes brought to the fore by the  
667 rigid body model (54). Generating through simulation sensory-  
668 motor data that matches the multi-resolution dynamics, noise,  
669 softness, etc. of sensors and actuators **during complex tasks  
670 that include both compliance and frictional contacts is poised  
671 to open the door** to a systematic study of the sensory-motor  
672 space for robotic manipulation and locomotion.

673 **Rec. 6. Emphasize use of emerging hardware architec-  
674 tures.** Recent advances in high-bandwidth memory and large  
675 core/processor counts can partially alleviate increased compu-  
676 tational loads associated with terramechanics, soft robotics,  
677 fluid-solid interaction and real-time simulation. Looking be-  
678 yond GPU and multi-core computing, a federated approach  
679 (55) in which various components of a model are handled sep-  
680 arately by different solvers in a co-simulation framework would:  
681 facilitate a plug-and-play vision that enables scalability of the  
682 solution; open the door to contributions coming from multiple  
683 groups; and enable the adoption of best-in-class solvers for  
684 subproblems.

685 **B. “High-vantage-point” aspects.** Unlike the previous subsec-  
686 tion, which provided pointed recommendations, the focus  
687 below is on capstone observations.

- 688 1. Building a simulation-in-robotics ecosystem **requires a sus-  
689 tained and** multi-disciplinary effort that poses numerous  
690 open questions in basic research
- 691 2. **Simulation-in-robotics has a foundational and sizable soft-  
692 ware development component to it**
- 693 3. **Simulation-in-robotics provides a grand challenge that  
694 has manifest societal impact**

695 **High Level 1. Building a simulation-in-robotics ecosys-  
696 tem requires a sustained and multi-disciplinary effort  
697 that poses numerous open questions in basic research.**  
698 Several types of simulation **techniques** have to be combined  
699 to produce a simulation-in-robotics solution platform. A dy-  
700 namics engine is needed to capture the time evolution of the  
701 robots in environments that can be unstructured and them-  
702 selves be changing in time; sensor simulation is required in  
703 controlling the agents; meaningful sensor simulation is predi-  
704 cated on the ability to simulate the environment and model  
705 its unstructured and time-dependent nature; simulating the  
706 human dimension in HRI; finally, communication simulation  
707 comes into play for agent-to-agent or agent-to-infrastructure  
708 communication. **Open problems that defy our current level of  
709 understanding riddle each of these simulation aspects whose in-  
710 terplay ultimately defines the concept of simulation in robotics.**  
711 Addressing these open problems requires basic research in a  
712 variety of areas: physics-based modeling (friction, contact,  
713 impact, soft/compliant bodies, fluid-solid interaction, terrame-  
714 chanics); numerical methods (fast real-time solvers, linear  
715 solvers, optimization techniques, computational geometry, the



numerical solution of differential algebraic and partial differential equations, nonlinear finite element analysis, computational fluid dynamics, etc.); software development (hardware-aware software); and data analysis (uncertainty quantification). Serendipitously, several funded initiatives are ongoing, e.g., soft robotics (NSF) and terramechanics (DOD), and bound to have an impact for the problem at hand. Nonetheless, the majority of the simulation-in-robotics multi-disciplinary open issues, e.g., modeling the human component in HRI, sensor modeling, model composability, etc., linger and at best are tangentially addressed in a context that lacks synergy and is non-programmatic. Against this backdrop, we are of the opinion that the benefits of a broad multi-agency initiative could be twofold: stimulate fundamental research in relevant areas, and foster its rapid translation into open source simulation platforms. A broad initiative of this caliber would bring together, ideally in an international framework, research groups from academia and agile software development groups from academia, research labs, and industry.

**High Level 2. Simulation-in-robotics has a foundational and sizable software development component to it.** While posing significant challenges, software development is not a research activity insofar as simulation-in-robotics is concerned. Yet the process adopted for developing the necessary software infrastructure along with the terms under which the software is released play a role in **how soon simulation makes a difference in robotics**. An important aspect is whether or not the software that underlies a simulation-in-robotics initiative should be released as open source. Likewise, there are several licenses, some more permissive than others, vis-à-vis how open-source can be used/modified/distributed. The salient point is that software that solves the problem at hand is desirable in any form. Perhaps, at the onset of a simulation-in-robotics initiative open source released under a permissive license such as MIT is more attractive only for the reason that a component of it, be it a graphical user interface, data input/output facilities, a particular algorithm, a collision detection implementation, etc., might be recycled by another effort that itself might be open or closed source. In our experience, the argument that an open source code grows faster owing to contributions from volunteers has proven largely unsubstantial. Indeed, the level of skill and expertise required to make meaningful contributions to a project are prohibitive, particularly early on in the trail-blazing phase of the project. In fact, the point in time in the software life cycle when volunteers can help marks the moment when the project would ideally go commercial or be sponsored by such an entity. This brings up the question of who should develop the software that enables the simulation-in-robotics vision. Encouraging domain experts to engage in software development pursuits that have a manifest translation attribute; i.e., demonstrating new algorithms, modeling approaches, etc., would be beneficial, particularly at the onset of the initiative and when done with a mindset of generating open-source software. Ideally, these domain-expert generated software components would be recycled by more mature simulation platforms. In this ecosystem, as the field matures, one can hope that bigger and perhaps commercial entities would step in to carry the burden of adding the features of convenience that accelerate solution adoption.

**High Level 3. Simulation-in-robotics provides a grand challenge that has manifest societal impact.** It is this

group's belief that computer simulation can and should play an important role in smart robotics. We take our cue from the enthusiastic adoption and broad impact that computer simulation has had in other industries and endeavors – from building cars and airplanes to planetary exploration. Yet compared to CAD, computer aided manufacturing (CAM) and CAE solutions that anchor both the product life-cycle in industry and a vigorous research enterprise in academia, the simulation in robotics field is in its infancy. Moreover, beyond lack of maturity, simulation in robotics is faced with the task of serving user groups pulling in different directions by virtue of them being engaged in different activities such as *design* (will it break? is it fast enough? can we build it?), *controls* (how can we make it reconfigure? how does it climb stairs? how does it work with other robots? will it work under limited sensing?), *machine learning* (learn gradually without forgetting; how do I close the sim-to-real gap?) and *artificial intelligence* (when and how to express empathy?). Lastly, by comparison with CAD/CAM/CAE, simulation in robotics poses unique and truly multi-disciplinary challenges, some of them summarized in this document. While established commercial CAD/CAM/CAE solution providers, e.g., MSC.ADAMS, Siemens, Dassault Systèmes, FunctionBae, etc., are anticipated to gradually address the needs of the robotics community, our near-term hopes are pinned on nimbler and more focused platforms, e.g., Bullet (25), Chrono (36), DART (26), Drake (56), MuJoCo (35), ODE (24), SOFA (57). These platforms are by and large open source; are plugged deeper into the research community; and have the flexibility to rapidly translate modeling, numerical methods, sensor simulation, graphics, and emerging hardware architectures breakthroughs into advances that amplify the impact that simulation plays in robotics.

## Conclusions

**This contribution outlines benefits that simulation can provide in the smart robotics design process; and barriers that need to be overcome for simulation to deliver on its potential in this arena. Sharing the viewpoint that simulation is not a goal in itself but a means to an end, we believe that undertaking a focused, coordinated and sustained research and software development effort in this area is timely.** In the process, the simulation community will have to address research questions at the intersection of computer science, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, cognitive science, and applied mathematics. **Without a systematic, guided, and all-encompassing effort, advancing the state of the art will be marred by trial-and-error detours.** The pressing question is how to jump start a robotics-simulation cross-pollination process that would speedily transition the effort from the “academic debate” phase into a “simulation-enabled building and demonstration of technology” phase. This transition can be catalyzed by a sustained decade-long financial commitment, which would ensure funding for cross-disciplinary efforts that promote collaboration, competition and compilation of open repositories of **validated** models and source code. As witnessed in the aerospace and automotive industry, the paradigm shift to digital, while manifestly impactful, took decades to coalesce. **Learning from this experience, the hope is that simulation will lead to breakthroughs in the design of smart robots in a matter of years rather than decades.**

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