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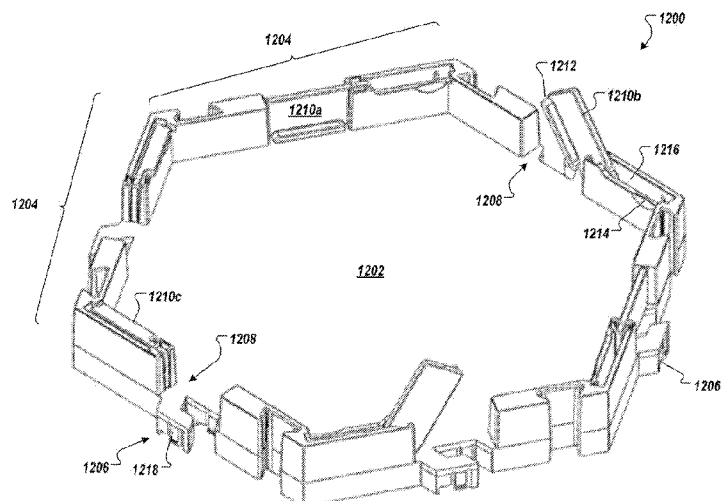


FIG. 12

(57) Abstract: A playset system for autonomous devices includes a communal area including a substantially horizontal and substantially planar area bounded by a plurality of side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a plurality of ports. Each port is disposed in a side wall, each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors, and each port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the autonomous devices when closed, and to allow passage of the autonomous devices when open.

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HABITAT FOR VIBRATION POWERED DEVICE

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Patent Application No. 61/246,023, entitled "Vibration Powered Vehicle," filed September 25, 2009, U.S. Patent Application No. 12/860,696, entitled "Vibration Powered Vehicle," filed August 20, 2010, and U.S. Patent Application No. 12/872,209, entitled "Vibration Powered Toy," filed August 31, 2010, each of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

BACKGROUND

This specification relates to habitats for devices that move based on oscillatory motion and/or vibration.

One example of vibration driven movement is a vibrating electric football game. A vibrating horizontal metal surface induced inanimate plastic figures to move randomly or slightly directionally. More recent examples of vibration driven motion use internal power sources and a vibrating mechanism located on a vehicle.

One method of creating movement-inducing vibrations is to use rotational motors that spin a shaft attached to a counterweight. The rotation of the counterweight induces an oscillatory motion. Power sources include wind up springs that are manually powered or DC electric motors. The most recent trend is to use pager motors designed to vibrate a pager or cell phone in silent mode. Vibrobots and Bristlebots are two modern examples of vehicles that use vibration to induce movement. For example, small, robotic devices, such as Vibrobots and Bristlebots, can use motors with counterweights to create vibrations. The robots' legs are generally metal wires or stiff plastic bristles. The vibration causes the entire robot to vibrate up and down as well as rotate. These robotic devices tend to drift and rotate because no significant directional control is achieved.

Vibrobots tend to use long metal wire legs. The shape and size of these vehicles vary widely and typically range from short 2" devices to tall 10" devices. Rubber feet are often added to the legs to avoid damaging tabletops and to alter the friction coefficient. Vibrobots typically have 3 or 4 legs, although designs with 10-20 exist. The vibration of the body and legs creates a motion pattern that is mostly random in direction and in rotation. Collision with walls does not result in a new direction and the result is that the wall only limits motion in that direction. The appearance of lifelike motion is very low due to the highly random motion.

Bristlebots are sometimes described in the literature as tiny directional Vibrobots.

Bristlebots use hundreds of short nylon bristles for legs. The most common source of the bristles, and the vehicle body, is to use the entire head of a toothbrush. A pager motor and battery complete the typical design. Motion can be random and directionless depending on the motor and body orientation and bristle direction. Designs that use bristles angled to the rear with an attached rotating motor can achieve a general forward direction with varying amounts of turning and sideways drifting. Collisions with objects such as walls cause the vehicle to stop, then turn left or right and continue on in a general forward direction. The appearance of lifelike motion is minimal due to a gliding movement and a zombie-like reaction to hitting a wall.

SUMMARY

In general, one innovative aspect of the subject matter described in this specification can be embodied in apparatus, systems, or kits that include a communal area including a substantially horizontal and substantially planar area bounded by a plurality of side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a plurality of ports. Each port is disposed in a side wall, and each port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the autonomous devices when closed, and to allow passage of the autonomous devices when open, and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors.

These and other embodiments can each optionally include one or more of the following features. Each autonomous device includes a vibration-powered drive. The kit includes at least one track adapted for traversal by the autonomous devices, and each track is adapted to connect to the communal area at one of the ports using one of the connectors. Each track includes a channel having vertical lateral sides, open ends, and a floor. The vertical lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between the open ends. The floor includes a substantially planar surface and an upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets the vertical lateral sides. The upward curvature is adapted to cause each autonomous device to tend to turn toward a centerline of the channel when the autonomous device moves toward the lateral side of the channel. Each track is adapted to connect to the communal area using one of the connectors on the communal area and a corresponding connector at one end of the channel such that the end of the channel substantially aligns horizontally with one of the ports and the floor of the channel substantially aligns vertically with the substantially planar area of the communal area. Each track includes a connector at each end of the channel and each of the connectors is adjacent to a port of the communal area is adapted to interlock with each connector at each end of the channel. The side walls are substantially straight along a horizontal dimension. The side

walls of the communal area form a substantially regular polygon. The substantially regular polygon includes at least five sides. The substantially regular polygon includes six sides. The communal area includes a substantially planar open space and each side wall has a horizontal dimension that is at least three times a horizontal dimension of each of the plurality of ports. Each gate includes a lever and is pivotally attached to a portion of one of the side walls of the communal area, and each gate is adapted to be opened and closed by rotating the lever in an arc substantially perpendicular to the substantially planar area of the communal area.

In general, another innovative aspect of the subject matter described in this specification can be embodied in apparatus, systems, or kits that include at least one communal section having a communal area bounded by a plurality of vertical side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a plurality of ports. Each port is disposed in a side wall along one of the side walls of the communal area and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors. At least one track is adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices and is adapted to connect to the communal area at one of the ports using one of the connectors. Each track includes a channel having vertical lateral sides, open ends, and a floor, wherein the vertical lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between the open ends. The floor includes a substantially planar surface and an upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets the vertical lateral sides.

These and other embodiments can each optionally include one or more of the following features. Each port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the vibration-powered devices when closed, and to allow passage of the vibration-powered devices when open. Each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors. Each track includes a connector at each end of the channel and each of the connectors adjacent to a port of the communal area is adapted to interlock with the connectors at the ends of the channel. At least one vibration-powered device includes a body, a rotational motor coupled to the body, an eccentric load, and a plurality of legs. The rotational motor is adapted to rotate the eccentric load, and the plurality of legs each have a leg base and a leg tip at a distal end relative to the leg base. At least a portion of the plurality of legs are constructed from a flexible material, injection molded, integrally coupled to the body at the leg base, and include at least one driving leg configured to cause the vibration-powered device to move in a direction generally defined by an offset between the leg base and the leg tip as the rotational motor rotates the eccentric load.

In general, another innovative aspect of the subject matter described in this

specification can be embodied in apparatus, systems, or kits that include at least one communal section including a communal area bounded by a plurality of vertical side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a plurality of ports. Each port is disposed in a side wall of the communal area and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors. Each port also
5 includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the vibration-powered devices when closed, and to allow passage of the vibration-powered devices when open. At least one track is adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices, and each track is adapted to connect to the communal area at one of the ports using one of the connectors. Each track includes open ends, a floor, and a channel having lateral sides adapted to limit
10 movement of the vibration-powered devices laterally with respect to a longitudinal dimension of the channel.

These and other embodiments can each optionally include one or more of the following features. The lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between the open ends. The kit or system includes a plurality of tracks adapted for traversal by
15 vibration-powered devices, including at least one straight track and at least one curved track. Each channel includes an upward curvature in a vicinity of at least one lateral side and the upward curvature is adapted to cause a vibration-powered device to tend to turn toward a centerline of the channel when the vibration-powered device moves forward at an angle relative to the lateral side of the channel.

In general, another innovative aspect of the subject matter described in this specification can be embodied in apparatus, systems, or kits that include a substantially planar floor disposed between longitudinal ends, a connector at each longitudinal end, and lateral sides adapted to limit movement of vibration-powered devices laterally with respect to a longitudinal dimension of the floor. The connector is adapted to interlock with a
20 corresponding connector on another playset component. The lateral sides terminate at each longitudinal end to form an open end, and the floor includes an upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets the lateral sides.

These and other embodiments can each optionally include one or more of the following features. The lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between
30 the open ends.

In general, another innovative aspect of the subject matter described in this specification can be embodied in methods for that include the acts of connecting at least one track component to a communal area component, repositioning at least one gate on one of the communal area component or one of the track components, and operating at least one self-

propelled, vibration-driven device in at least one of the communal area component or one of the track components. The communal area component includes a communal area having a substantially horizontal and substantially planar area bounded by a plurality of side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a plurality of ports. Each port is disposed in a side wall, and each
5 port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the autonomous devices when closed, and to allow passage of the autonomous devices when open. Each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors, and at least one track component is adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices. Each track component is adapted to connect to the communal area component at one of the ports using one of the connectors, and each track
10 includes a channel having lateral sides adapted to limit movement of the vibration-powered devices laterally with respect to a longitudinal dimension of the channel, open ends, and a floor.

The systems, apparatus, and kits described in this specification can be used with a vehicle that has a plurality of legs and a vibration drive. A "vehicle" can include any type of
15 moving robot, in particular, a toy robot in general and toy robots that have the shape of a beetle or some other animal, insect, or reptile.

According to one aspect of the vehicle, the legs could be angled or curved and flexible. The vibrating motor could generate a force (F_v) that is directed downward and is suitable for deflecting at least the front legs, so that the vehicle moves forward. The legs of
20 the vehicle are advantageously inclined in a direction that is offset from the vertical. The bases of the legs are thus arranged farther forward on the vehicle relative to the tips of the legs. In particular, the front legs are adapted to deflect when the vehicle vibrates due to the vibrating motor. Conversely, the vibrating motor could also generate a force (F_v) that is directed upward and is suitable for making the vehicle hop or for lifting the front legs from
25 the ground surface.

According to another aspect of the vehicle, the geometry of the back legs could be constructed such that a different braking or dragging effect is achieved. In other words, the geometry of the back legs could be constructed such that the tendency for rotation due to the vibration of the vibrating motor is counteracted. The rotating, eccentric weight moves during
30 the lifting of the front legs in the lateral direction, with respect to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle, such that without countermeasures, the vehicle would move along a curve. Countermeasures can be achieved in various ways: more weight could be shifted to one front leg in comparison to the other front leg. The length of a back leg could be increased in comparison to the other back leg. The stiffness of the legs could be increased on one side in

comparison to the legs on the other side. A back leg could have a thicker construction in comparison to the other back legs on the other side. One of the back legs could be arranged farther forward than the other back leg.

According to another aspect of the vehicle, the vehicle could be constructed to rotate and to right itself by the effect of the rotating torque of the vibrating motor. This can be achieved, for example, in that the center of gravity of the body or of the vehicle is positioned close to or on the axis of rotation of the vibrating motor. In addition, the sides and the top side of the vehicle could be constructed to allow the self righting of the vehicle during the vibration. Thus, a high point could be provided on the top side of the vehicle, so that the vehicle cannot lie completely upside down on its back. However, fins, plates, or flippers could also be arranged on the sides and/or on the back of the vehicle, with their outer points advantageously arranged close to or on a virtual cylinder.

According to another aspect of the vehicle, the legs could be arranged in two rows of legs, wherein there is a space, in particular, a V shaped recess, between the body of the vehicle and the legs of the vehicle, so that the legs can bend inward during a righting rotation. In this way, the righting movement of the vehicle is simplified if it should topple over. Advantageously, the legs are arranged in two rows of legs as well as to the side and above the axis of rotation of the vibrating motor.

According to another aspect of the vehicle, the vehicle could have an elastic nose or an elastic front part, so that the vehicle rebounds when impacting an obstacle. The elastic nose or the elastic front part is advantageously constructed from rubber. In addition, the elastic nose or the elastic front part advantageously has a construction running to a point. In this way, the vehicle could more easily avoid an obstacle, without the use of a sensor or some other control for a steering motion.

According to another aspect of the vehicle, the vibration drive could have a motor and an eccentric weight, wherein the eccentric weight is arranged in front of the front legs. In this way, a reinforced lifting movement of the front legs is achieved, wherein the back legs remain as much as possible on the ground (but may also bounce slightly). In particular, the eccentric weight is arranged in front of the motor. In addition, a battery is advantageously arranged on the rear part of the vehicle, in order to increase the weight on the back legs. Both the battery and the motor are advantageously arranged between the legs. The axis of rotation of the motor can run along the longitudinal axis of the vehicle.

The vehicle could thus be constructed with a vibrating motor, and could imitate an organic life form, in particular, a living beetle or other small animal, with respect to

advancing speed, stability of the forward motion, tendency to roam, ability to right itself, and/or individuality.

The vehicle can be a device, in particular, a toy robot with a vibration drive that pursues one or more of the following goals:

1. Vehicle with vibrating motor with flexible legs in varied configuration;
2. Maximizing the vehicle speed;
3. Changing the predominant direction of motion of the vehicle;
4. Preventing the overturning of the vehicle;
5. Production of vehicles that can right themselves;
6. Generating a movement that resembles living animals, in particular, beetles, insects, reptiles, or other small animals;
7. Generating multiple modes of movement, so that the vehicles differ visibly in their movement, in order to provide many different vehicle types;
8. Generating apparent intelligence when obstacles are encountered.

The details of one or more embodiments of the subject matter described in this specification are set forth in the accompanying drawings and the description below. Other features, aspects, and advantages of the subject matter will become apparent from the description, the drawings, and the claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a diagram that illustrates an example vibration powered device.

FIGS. 2A through 2D are diagrams that illustrate example forces that are involved with movement of the vibration powered device of FIG. 1.

FIGS. 3A through 3C are diagrams that show various examples of alternative leg configurations for vibration powered devices.

FIG. 4 shows an example front view indicating a center of gravity for the device.

FIG. 5 shows an example side view indicating a center of gravity for the device.

FIG. 6 shows a top view of the device and its flexible nose.

FIGS. 7A and 7B show example dimensions of the device.

FIG. 8 shows one example configuration of example materials from which the device can be constructed.

FIGS. 9A and 9B show example devices that include a shark/dorsal fin and a pair of side/pectoral fins, respectively.

FIG. 10 is a flow diagram of a process for operating a vibration-powered device.

FIG. 11 is a flow diagram of a process for constructing a vibration-powered device.

FIG. 12 is a perspective view of a communal area playset component.

FIG. 13A is a perspective view of a straight track playset component.

FIG. 13B is an end view of one implementation of a straight track component.

FIG. 13C is an end view or cross section of an alternative track channel for reducing side wall collisions.

FIG. 14 is a perspective view of a curved track playset component.

FIG. 15 shows a multi-component playset.

FIG. 16 is a flow diagram of a process for using a playset for autonomous devices.

Like reference numbers and designations in the various drawings indicate like elements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Small robotic devices, or vibration-powered vehicles, can be designed to move across a surface, e.g., a floor, table, or other relatively flat surface. The robotic device is adapted to move autonomously and, in some implementations, turn in seemingly random directions. In general, the robotic devices include a housing, multiple legs, and a vibrating mechanism (e.g., a motor or spring-loaded mechanical winding mechanism rotating an eccentric load, a motor or other mechanism adapted to induce oscillation of a counterweight, or other arrangement of components adapted to rapidly alter the center of mass of the device). As a result, the miniature robotic devices, when in motion, can resemble organic life, such as bugs or insects.

Movement of the robotic device can be induced by the motion of a rotational motor inside of, or attached to, the device, in combination with a rotating weight with a center of mass that is offset relative to the rotational axis of the motor. The rotational movement of the weight causes the motor and the robotic device to which it is attached to vibrate. In some implementations, the rotation is approximately in the range of 6000-9000 revolutions per minute (rpm's), although higher or lower rpm values can be used. As an example, the device can use the type of vibration mechanism that exists in many pagers and cell phones that, when in vibrate mode, cause the pager or cell phone to vibrate. The vibration induced by the vibration mechanism can cause the device to move across the surface (e.g., the floor) using legs that are configured to alternately flex (in a particular direction) and return to the original position as the vibration causes the device to move up and down.

Various features can be incorporated into the robotic devices. For example, various implementations of the devices can include features (e.g., shape of the legs, number of legs, frictional characteristics of the leg tips, relative stiffness or flexibility of the legs, resiliency of the legs, relative location of the rotating counterweight with respect to the legs, etc.) for

facilitating efficient transfer of vibrations to forward motion. The speed and direction of the robotic device's movement can depend on many factors, including the rotational speed of the motor, the size of the offset weight attached to the motor, the power supply, the characteristics (e.g., size, orientation, shape, material, resiliency, frictional characteristics, etc.) of the "legs" attached to the housing of the device, the properties of the surface on which the device operates, the overall weight of the device, and so on.

In some implementations, the devices include features that are designed to compensate for a tendency of the device to turn as a result of the rotation of the counterweight and/or to alter the tendency for, and direction of, turning between different robotic devices. The components of the device can be positioned to maintain a relatively low center of gravity (or center of mass) to discourage tipping (e.g., based on the lateral distance between the leg tips) and to align the components with the rotational axis of the rotating motor to encourage rolling (e.g., when the device is not upright). Likewise, the device can be designed to encourage self-righting based on features that tend to encourage rolling when the device is on its back or side in combination with the relative flatness of the device when it is upright (e.g., when the device is "standing" on its leg tips). Features of the device can also be used to increase the appearance of random motion and to make the device appear to respond intelligently to obstacles. Different leg configurations and placements can also induce different types of motion and/or different responses to vibration, obstacles, or other forces. Moreover, adjustable leg lengths can be used to provide some degree of steering capability. In some implementations, the robotic devices can simulate real-life objects, such as crawling bugs, rodents, or other animals and insects.

FIG. 1 is a diagram that illustrates an example device 100 that is shaped like a bug. The device 100 includes a housing 102 (e.g., resembling the body of the bug) and legs 104. Inside (or attached to) the housing 102 are the components that control and provide movement for the device 100, including a rotational motor, power supply (e.g., a battery), and an on/off switch. Each of the legs 104 includes a leg tip 106a and a leg base 106b. The properties of the legs 104, including the position of the leg base 106b relative to the leg tip 106a, can contribute to the direction and speed in which the device 100 tends to move. The device 100 is depicted in an upright position (i.e., standing on legs 104) on a supporting surface 110 (e.g., a substantially planar floor, table top, etc. that counteracts gravitational forces).

Overview of Legs

Legs 104 can include front legs 104a, middle legs 104b, and rear legs 104c. For

example, the device 100 can include a pair of front legs 104a that may be designed to perform differently from middle legs 104b and rear legs 104c. For example, the front legs 104a may be configured to provide a driving force for the device 100 by contacting an underlying surface 110 and causing the device to hop forward as the device vibrates. Middle legs 104b
5 can help provide support to counteract material fatigue (e.g., after the device 100 rests on the legs 104 for long periods of time) that may eventually cause the front legs 104a to deform and/or lose resiliency. In some implementations, device 100 can exclude middle legs 104b and include only front legs 104a and rear legs 104c. In some implementations, front legs 104a and one or more rear legs 104c can be designed to be in contact with a surface, while
10 middle legs 104b can be slightly off the surface so that the middle legs 104b do not introduce significant additional drag forces and/or hopping forces that may make it more difficult to achieve desired movements (e.g., tendency to move in a relatively straight line and/or a desired amount of randomness of motion).

In some implementations, the device 100 can be configured such that only two front
15 legs 104a and one rear leg 104c are in contact with a substantially flat surface 110, even if the device includes more than one rear leg 104c and several middle legs 104b. In other implementations, the device 100 can be configured such that only one front leg 104a and two rear legs 104c are in contact with a flat surface 110. Throughout this specification, descriptions of being in contact with the surface can include a relative degree of contact. For
20 example, when one or more of the front legs 104a and one or more of the back legs 104c are described as being in contact with a substantially flat surface 110 and the middle legs 104b are described as not being in contact with the surface 110, it is also possible that the front and back legs 104a and 104c can simply be sufficiently longer than the middle legs 104b (and sufficiently stiff) that the front and back legs 104a and 104c provide more support for the
25 weight of the device 100 than do the middle legs 104b, even though the middle legs 104b are technically actually in contact with the surface 110. In some implementations, even legs that have a lesser contribution to support of the device may nonetheless be in contact when the device 100 is in an upright position, especially when vibration of the device causes an up and down movement that compresses and bends the driving legs and allows additional legs to
30 contact the surface 110. Greater predictability and control of movement (e.g., in a straight direction) can be obtained by constructing the device so that a sufficiently small number of legs (e.g., fewer than twenty or fewer than thirty) contact the support surface 110 and/or contribute to the support of the device in the upright position when the device is either at rest or as the rotating eccentric load induces movement. In this respect, it is possible for some

legs to provide support even without contacting the support surface 110 (e.g., one or more short legs can provide stability by contacting an adjacent longer leg to increase overall stiffness of the adjacent longer leg). Typically, however, each leg is sufficiently stiff that four or fewer legs are capable of supporting the weight of the device without substantial deformation (e.g., less than 5% as a percentage of the height of the leg base 106b from the support surface 110 when the device 100 is in an upright position).

Different leg lengths can be used to introduce different movement characteristics, as further discussed below. The various legs can also include different properties, e.g., different stiffnesses or coefficients of friction, as further described below. Generally, the legs can be arranged in substantially parallel rows along each lateral side of the device 100 (e.g., FIG. 1 depicts one row of legs on the right lateral side of the device 100; a corresponding row of legs (not shown in FIG. 1) can be situated along the left lateral side of the device 100).

In general, the number of legs 104 that provide meaningful or any support for the device can be relatively limited. For example, the use of less than twenty legs that contact the support surface 110 and/or that provide support for the device 100 when the device 100 is in an upright position (i.e., an orientation in which the one or more driving legs 104a are in contact with a support surface) can provide more predictability in the directional movement tendencies of the device 100 (e.g., a tendency to move in a relatively straight and forward direction), or can enhance a tendency to move relatively fast by increasing the potential deflection of a smaller number of legs, or can minimize the number of legs that may need to be altered to achieve the desired directional control, or can improve the manufacturability of fewer legs with sufficient spacing to allow room for tooling. In addition to providing support by contacting the support surface 110, legs 104 can provide support by, for example, providing increased stability for legs that contact the surface 110. In some implementations, each of the legs that provides independent support for the device 100 is capable of supporting a substantial portion of the weight of the device 100. For example, the legs 104 can be sufficiently stiff that four or fewer legs are capable of statically (e.g., when the device is at rest) supporting the device without substantial deformation of the legs 104 (e.g., without causing the legs to deform such that the body of the device 100 moves more than 5% as a percentage of the height of the leg base 106b from the support surface).

As described here at a high level, many factors or features can contribute to the movement and control of the device 100. For example, the device's center of gravity (CG), and whether it is more forward or towards the rear of the device, can influence the tendency of the device 100 to turn. Moreover, a lower CG can help to prevent the device 100 from

tipping over. The location and distribution of the legs 104 relative to the CG can also prevent tipping. For example, if pairs or rows of legs 104 on each side of the device 100 are too close together and the device 100 has a relatively high CG (e.g., relative to the lateral distance between the rows or pairs of legs), then the device 100 may have a tendency to tip over on its side. Thus, in some implementations, the device includes rows or pairs of legs 104 that provide a wider lateral stance (e.g., pairs of front legs 104a, middle legs 104b, and rear legs 104c are spaced apart by a distance that defines an approximate width of the lateral stance) than a distance between the CG and a flat supporting surface on which the device 100 rests in an upright position. For example, the distance between the CG and the supporting surface can be in the range of 50-80% of the value of the lateral stance (e.g., if the lateral stance is 0.5 inches, the CG may be in the range of 0.25-0.4 inches from the surface 110). Moreover, the vertical location of the CG of the device 100 can be within a range of 40-60% of the distance between a plane that passes through the leg tips 106a and the highest protruding surface on the top side of the housing 102. In some implementations, a distance 409a and 409b (as shown in FIG. 4) between each row of the tips of legs 104 and a longitudinal axis of the device 100 that runs through the CG can be roughly the same or less than the distance 406 (as shown in FIG. 4) between the tips 106a of two rows of legs 104 to help facilitate stability when the device is resting on both rows of legs.

The device 100 can also include features that generally compensate for the device's tendency to turn. Driving legs (e.g., front legs 104a) can be configured such that one or more legs on one lateral side of the device 100 can provide a greater driving force than one or more corresponding legs on the other lateral side of the device 100 (e.g., through relative leg lengths, relative stiffness or resiliency, relative fore/aft location in the longitudinal direction, or relative lateral distance from the CG). Similarly, dragging legs (e.g., back legs 104c) can be configured such that one or more legs on one lateral side of the device 100 can provide a greater drag force than one or more corresponding legs on the other lateral side of the device 100 (e.g., through relative leg lengths, relative stiffness or resiliency, relative fore/aft location in the longitudinal direction, or relative lateral distance from the CG). In some implementations, the leg lengths can be tuned either during manufacturing or subsequently to modify (e.g., increase or reduce) a tendency of the device to turn.

Movement of the device can also be influenced by the leg geometry of the legs 104. For example, a longitudinal offset between the leg tip (i.e., the end of the leg that touches the surface 110) and the leg base (i.e., the end of the leg that attaches to the device housing) of any driving legs induces movement in a forward direction as the device vibrates. Including

some curvature, at least in the driving legs, further facilitates forward motion as the legs tend to bend, moving the device forward, when vibrations force the device downward and then spring back to a straighter configuration as the vibrations force the device upward (e.g., resulting in hopping completely or partially off the surface, such that the leg tips move forward above or slide forward across the surface 110).

The ability of the legs to induce forward motion results in part from the ability of the device to vibrate vertically on the resilient legs. As shown in FIG. 1, the device 100 includes an underside 122. The power supply and motor for the device 100 can be contained in a chamber that is formed between the underside 122 and the upper body of the device, for example. The length of the legs 104 creates a space 124 (at least in the vicinity of the driving legs) between the underside 122 and the surface 110 on which the device 100 operates. The size of the space 124 depends on how far the legs 104 extend below the device relative to the underside 122. The space 124 provides room for the device 100 (at least in the vicinity of the driving legs) to move downward as the periodic downward force resulting from the rotation of the eccentric load causes the legs to bend. This downward movement can facilitate forward motion induced by the bending of the legs 104.

The device can also include the ability to self-right itself, for example, if the device 100 tips over or is placed on its side or back. For example, constructing the device 100 such that the rotational axis of the motor and the eccentric load are approximately aligned with the longitudinal CG of the device 100 tends to enhance the tendency of the device 100 to roll (i.e., in a direction opposite the rotation of the motor and the eccentric load). Moreover, construction of the device housing to prevent the device from resting on its top or side (e.g., using one or more protrusions on the top and/or sides of the device housing) and to increase the tendency of the device to bounce when on its top or side can enhance the tendency to roll. Furthermore, constructing the legs of a sufficiently flexible material and providing clearance on the housing undercarriage that the leg tips to bend inward can help facilitate rolling of the device from its side to an upright position.

FIG. 1 shows a body shoulder 112 and a head side surface 114, which can be constructed from rubber, elastomer, or other resilient material, contributing to the device's ability to self-right after tipping. The bounce from the shoulder 112 and the head side surface 114 can be significantly more than the lateral bounce achieved from the legs, which can be made of rubber or some other elastomeric material, but which can be less resilient than the shoulder 112 and the head side surface 114 (e.g., due to the relative lateral stiffness of the shoulder 112 and the head side surface 114 compared to the legs 104). Rubber legs 104,

which can bend inward toward the body 102 as the device 100 rolls, increase the self-righting tendency, especially when combined with the angular/rolling forces induced by rotation of the eccentric load. The bounce from the shoulder 112 and the head side surface 114 can also allow the device 100 to become sufficiently airborne that the angular forces induced by rotation of the eccentric load can cause the device to roll, thereby facilitating self-righting.

The device can also be configured to include a degree of randomness of motion, which can make the device 100 appear to behave like an insect or other animate object. For example, vibration induced by rotation of the eccentric load can further induce hopping as a result of the curvature and “tilt” of the legs. The hopping can further induce a vertical acceleration (e.g., away from the surface 110) and a forward acceleration (e.g., generally toward the direction of forward movement of the device 100). During each hop, the rotation of the eccentric load can further cause the device to turn toward one side or the other depending on the location and direction of movement of the eccentric load. The degree of random motion can be increased if relatively stiffer legs are used to increase the amplitude of hopping. The degree of random motion can be influenced by the degree to which the rotation of the eccentric load tends to be either in phase or out of phase with the hopping of the device (e.g., out of phase rotation relative to hopping may increase the randomness of motion). The degree of random motion can also be influenced by the degree to which the back legs 104c tend to drag. For example, dragging of back legs 104c on both lateral sides of the device 100 may tend to keep the device 100 traveling in a more straight line, while back legs 104c that tend to not drag (e.g., if the legs bounce completely off the ground) or dragging of back legs 104c more on one side of the device 100 than the other can tend to increase turning.

Another feature is “intelligence” of the device 100, which can allow the device to interact in an apparently intelligent manner with obstacles, including, for example, bouncing off any obstacles (e.g., walls, etc.) that the device 100 encounters during movement. For example, the shape of the nose 108 and the materials from which the nose 108 is constructed can enhance a tendency of the device to bounce off of obstacles and to turn away from the obstacle. Each of these features can contribute to how the device 100 moves, and will be described below in more detail.

FIG. 1 illustrates a nose 108 that can contribute to the ability of the device 100 to deflect off of obstacles. Nose left side 116a and nose right side 116b can form the nose 108. The nose sides 116a and 116b can form a shallow point or another shape that helps to cause the device 100 to deflect off obstacles (e.g., walls) encountered as the device 100 moves in a generally forward direction. The device 100 can include a space within the head 118 that

increases bounce by making the head more elastically deformable (i.e., reducing the stiffness). For example, when the device 100 crashes nose-first into an obstacle, the space within the head 118 allows the head of the device 100 to compress, which provides greater control over the bounce of the device 100 away from the obstacle than if the head 118 is constructed as a more solid block of material. The space within the head 118 can also better absorb impact if the device falls from some height (e.g., a table). The body shoulder 112 and head side surface 114, especially when constructed from rubber or other resilient material, can also contribute to the device's tendency to deflect or bounce off of obstacles encountered at a relatively high angle of incidence.

Wireless/Remote Control Embodiments

In some implementations, the device 100 includes a receiver that can, for example, receive commands from a remote control unit. Commands can be used, for example, to control the device's speed and direction, and whether the device is in motion or in a motionless state, to name a few examples. In some implementations, controls in the remote control unit can engage and disengage the circuit that connects the power unit (e.g., battery) to the device's motor, allowing the operator of the remote control to start and stop the device 100 at any time. Other controls (e.g., a joy stick, sliding bar, etc.) in the remote control unit can cause the motor in the device 100 to spin faster or slower, affecting the speed of the device 100. The controls can send the receiver on the device 100 different signals, depending on the commands that correspond to the movement of the controls. Controls can also turn on and off a second motor attached to a second eccentric load in the device 100 to alter lateral forces for the device 100, thereby changing a tendency of the device to turn and thus providing steering control. Controls in a remote control unit can also cause mechanisms in the device 100 to lengthen or shorten one or more of the legs and/or deflecting one or more of the legs forward, backward, or laterally to provide steering control.

Leg Motion and Hop

FIGS. 2A through 2D are diagrams that illustrate example forces that induce movement of the device 100 of FIG. 1. Some forces are provided by a rotational motor 202, which enable the device 100 to move autonomously across the surface 110. For example, the motor 202 can rotate an eccentric load 210 that generates moment and force vectors 205-215 as shown in FIGS. 2A-2D. Motion of the device 100 can also depend in part on the position of the legs 104 with respect to the counterweight 210 attached to the rotational motor 202. For example, placing the counterweight 210 in front of the front legs 104a will increase the tendency of the front legs 104a to provide the primary forward driving force (i.e., by focusing

more of the up and down forces on the front legs). For example, the distance between the counterweight 210 and the tips of the driving legs can be within a range of 20-100% of an average length of the driving legs. Moving the counterweight 210 back relative to the front legs 104a can cause other legs to contribute more to the driving forces.

5 FIG. 2A shows a side view of the example device 100 shown in FIG. 1 and further depicts a rotational moment 205 (represented by the rotational velocity ω_m and motor torque T_m) and a vertical force 206 represented by F_v . FIG. 2B shows a top view of the example device 100 shown in FIG. 1 and further shows a horizontal force 208 represented by F_h . Generally, a negative F_v is caused by upward movement of the eccentric load as it rotates, while a positive F_v can be caused by the downward movement of the eccentric load and/or the resiliency of the legs (e.g., as they spring back from a deflected position).

The forces F_v and F_h cause the device 100 to move in a direction that is consistent with the configuration in which the leg base 106b is positioned in front of the leg tip 106a. The direction and speed in which the device 100 moves can depend, at least in part, on the direction and magnitude of F_v and F_h . When the vertical force 206, F_v , is negative, the device 100 body is forced down. This negative F_v causes at least the front legs 104a to bend and compress. The legs generally compress along a line in space from the leg tip to the leg base. As a result, the body will lean so that the leg bends (e.g., the leg base 106b flexes (or deflects) about the leg tip 106a towards the surface 110) and causes the body to move forward (e.g., in a direction from the leg tip 106a towards the leg base 106b). F_v , when positive, provides an upward force on the device 100 allowing the energy stored in the compressed legs to release (lifting the device), and at the same time allowing the legs to drag or hop forward to their original position. The lifting force F_v on the device resulting from the rotation of the eccentric load combined with the spring-like leg forces are both involved in allowing the vehicle to hop vertically off the surface (or at least reducing the load on the front legs 104a) and allowing the legs 104 to return to their normal geometry (i.e., as a result of the resiliency of the legs). The release of the spring-like leg forces, along with the forward momentum created as the legs bend, propels the vehicle forward and upward, based on the angle of the line connecting the leg tip to the leg base, lifting the front legs 104a off the surface 110 (or at least reducing the load on the front legs 104a) and allowing the legs 104 to return to their normal geometry (i.e., as a result of the resiliency of the legs).

Generally, two “driving” legs (e.g., the front legs 104a, one on each side) are used, although some implementations may include only one driving leg or more than two driving legs. Which legs constitute driving legs can, in some implementations, be relative. For

example, even when only one driving leg is used, other legs may provide a small amount of forward driving forces. During the forward motion, some legs 104 may tend to drag rather than hop. Hop refers to the result of the motion of the legs as they bend and compress and then return to their normal configuration—depending on the magnitude of F_v , the legs can either stay in contact with the surface or lift off the surface for a short period of time as the nose is elevated. For example, if the eccentric load is located toward the front of the device 100, then the front of the device 100 can hop slightly, while the rear of the device 100 tends to drag. In some cases, however, even with the eccentric load located toward the front of the device 100, even the back legs 104c may sometimes hop off the surface, albeit to a lesser extent than the front legs 104a. Depending on the stiffness or resiliency of the legs, the speed of rotation of the rotational motor, and the degree to which a particular hop is in phase or out of phase with the rotation of the motor, a hop can range in duration from less than the time required for a full rotation of the motor to the time required for multiple rotations of the motor. During a hop, rotation of the eccentric load can cause the device to move laterally in one direction or the other (or both at different times during the rotation) depending on the lateral direction of rotation at any particular time and to move up or down (or both at different times during the rotation) depending on the vertical direction of rotation at any particular time.

Increasing hop time can be a factor in increasing speed. The more time that the vehicle spends with some of the leg off the surface 110 (or lightly touching the surface), the less time some of the legs are dragging (i.e., creating a force opposite the direction of forward motion) as the vehicle translates forward. Minimizing the time that the legs drag forward (as opposed to hop forward) can reduce drag caused by friction of the legs sliding along the surface 110. In addition, adjusting the CG of the device fore and aft can effect whether the vehicle hops with the front legs only, or whether the vehicle hops with most, if not all, of the legs off the ground. This balancing of the hop can take into account the CG, the mass of the offset weight and its rotational frequency, F_v and its location, and hop forces and their location(s).

Turning of Device

The motor rotation also causes a lateral force 208, F_h , which generally shifts back and forth as the eccentric load rotates. In general, as the eccentric load rotates (e.g., due to the motor 202), the left and right horizontal forces 208 are equal. The turning that results from the lateral force 208 on average typically tends to be greater in one direction (right or left) while the device's nose 108 is elevated, and greater in the opposite direction when the

device's nose 108 and the legs 104 are compressed down. During the time that the center of the eccentric load 210 is traveling upward (away from the surface 110), increased downward forces are applied to the legs 104, causing the legs 104 to grip the surface 110, minimizing lateral turning of the device 100, although the legs may slightly bend laterally depending on the stiffness of the legs 104. During the time when the eccentric load 210 is traveling downward, the downward force on the legs 104 decreases, and downward force of the legs 104 on the surface 110 can be reduced, which can allow the device to turn laterally during the time the downward force is reduced. The direction of turning generally depends on the direction of the average lateral forces caused by the rotation of the eccentric load 210 during the time when the vertical forces are positive relative to when the vertical forces are negative. Thus, the horizontal force 208, F_h , can cause the device 100 to turn slightly more when the nose 108 is elevated. When the nose 108 is elevated, the leg tips are either off the surface 110 or less downward force is on the front legs 104a which precludes or reduces the ability of the leg tips (e.g., leg tip 106a) to "grip" the surface 110 and to provide lateral resistance to turning. Features can be implemented to manipulate several motion characteristics to either counteract or enhance this tendency to turn.

The location of the CG can also influence a tendency to turn. While some amount of turning by the device 100 can be a desired feature (e.g., to make the device's movement appear random), excessive turning can be undesirable. Several design considerations can be made to compensate for (or in some cases to take advantage of) the device's tendency to turn. For example, the weight distribution of the device 100, or more specifically, the device's CG, can affect the tendency of the device 100 to turn. In some implementations, having CG relatively near the center of the device 100 and roughly centered about the legs 104 can increase a tendency for the device 100 to travel in a relatively straight direction (e.g., not spinning around).

Tuning the drag forces for different legs 104 is another way to compensate for the device's tendency to turn. For example, the drag forces for a particular leg 104 can depend on the leg's length, thickness, stiffness and the type of material from which the leg is made. In some implementations, the stiffness of different legs 104 can be tuned differently, such as having different stiffness characteristics for the front legs 104a, rear legs 104c and middle legs 104b. For example, the stiffness characteristics of the legs can be altered or tuned based on the thickness of the leg or the material used for the leg. Increasing the drag (e.g., by increasing a leg length, thickness, stiffness, and/or frictional characteristic) on one side of the device (e.g., the right side) can help compensate for a tendency of the device to turn (e.g., to

the left) based on the force F_h induced by the rotational motor and eccentric load.

Altering the position of the rear legs 104c is another way to compensate for the device's tendency to turn. For example, placing the legs 104 further toward the rear of the device 100 can help the device 100 travel in a more straight direction. Generally, a longer device 100 that has a relatively longer distance between the front and rear legs 104c may tend to travel in more of a straight direction than a device 100 that is shorter in length (i.e., the front legs 104a and rear legs 104c are closer together), at least when the rotating eccentric load is located in a relatively forward position on the device 100. The relative position of the rearmost legs 104 (e.g., by placing the rearmost leg on one side of the device farther forward or backward on the device than the rearmost leg on the other side of the device) can also help compensate for (or alter) the tendency to turn.

Various techniques can also be used to control the direction of travel of the device 100, including altering the load on specific legs, adjusting the number of legs, leg lengths, leg positions, leg stiffness, and drag coefficients. As illustrated in FIG. 2B, the lateral horizontal force 208, F_h , causes the device 100 to have a tendency to turn as the lateral horizontal force 208 generally tends to be greater in one direction than the other during hops. The horizontal force 208, F_h can be countered to make the device 100 move in an approximately straight direction. This result can be accomplished with adjustments to leg geometry and leg material selection, among other things.

FIG. 2C is a diagram that shows a rear view of the device 100 and further illustrates the relationship of the vertical force 206 F_v and the horizontal force 208 F_h in relation to each other. This rear view also shows the eccentric load 210 that is rotated by the rotational motor 202 to generate vibration, as indicated by the rotational moment 205.

Drag Forces

FIG. 2D is a diagram that shows a bottom view of the device 100 and further illustrates example leg forces 211-214 that are involved with direction of travel of the device 100. In combination, the leg forces 211-214 can induce velocity vectors that impact the predominant direction of travel of the device 100. The velocity vector 215, represented by T_{load} , represents the velocity vector that is induced by the motor/eccentricity rotational velocity (e.g., induced by the offset load attached to the motor) as it forces the driving legs 104 to bend, causing the device to lunge forward, and as it generates greater lateral forces in one direction than the other during hopping. The leg forces 211-214, represented by $F_1 - F_4$, represent the reactionary forces of the legs 104a1-104c2, respectively, that can be oriented so the legs 104a1-104c2, in combination, induce an opposite velocity vector relative to T_{load} . As

depicted in FIG. 2D, T_{load} is a velocity vector that tends to steer the device 100 to the left (as shown) due to the tendency for there to be greater lateral forces in one direction than the other when the device is hopping off the surface 110. At the same time, the forces $F_1 - F_2$ for the front legs 104a1 and 104a2 (e.g., as a result of the legs tending to drive the device forward and slightly laterally in the direction of the eccentric load 210 when the driving legs are compressed) and the forces $F_3 - F_4$ for the rear legs 104c1 and 104c2 (as a result of drag) each contribute to steering the device 100 to the right (as shown). (As a matter of clarification, because FIG. 2D shows the bottom view of the device 100, the left-right directions when the device 100 is placed upright are reversed.) In general, if the combined forces $F_1 - F_4$ approximately offset the side component of T_{load} , then the device 100 will tend to travel in a relatively straight direction.

Controlling the forces $F_1 - F_4$ can be accomplished in a number of ways. For example, the “push vector” created by the front legs 104a1 and 104a2 can be used to counter the lateral component of the motor-induced velocity. In some implementations, this can be accomplished by placing more weight on the front leg 104a2 to increase the leg force 212, represented by F_2 , as shown in FIG. 2D. Furthermore, a “drag vector” can also be used to counter the motor-induced velocity. In some implementations, this can be accomplished by increasing the length of the rear leg 104c2 or increasing the drag coefficient on the rear leg 104c2 for the force vector 804, represented by F_4 , in FIG. 2D. As shown, the legs 104a1 and 104a2 are the device’s front right and left legs, respectively, and the legs 104c1 and 104c2 are the device’s rear right and left legs, respectively.

Another technique for compensating for the device’s tendency to turn is increasing the stiffness of the legs 104 in various combinations (e.g., by making one leg thicker than another or constructing one leg using a material having a naturally greater stiffness). For example, a stiffer leg will have a tendency to bounce more than a more flexible leg. Left and right legs 104 in any leg pair can have different stiffnesses to compensate for the turning of the device 100 induced by the vibration of the motor 202. Stiffer front legs 104a can also produce more bounce.

Another technique for compensating for the device’s tendency to turn is to change the relative position of the rear legs 104c1 and 104c2 so that the drag vectors tend to compensate for turning induced by the motor velocity. For example, the rear leg 104c2 can be placed farther forward (e.g., closer to the nose 108) than the rear leg 104c1.

Leg Shape

Leg geometry contributes significantly to the way in which the device 100 moves.

Aspects of leg geometry include: locating the leg base in front of the leg tip, curvature of the legs, deflection properties of the legs, configurations that result in different drag forces for different legs, including legs that do not necessarily touch the surface, and having only three legs that touch the surface, to name a few examples.

5 Generally, depending on the position of the leg tip 106a relative to the leg base 106b, the device 100 can experience different behaviors, including the speed and stability of the device 100. For example, if the leg tip 106a is nearly directly below the leg base 106b when the device 100 is positioned on a surface, movement of the device 100 that is caused by the motor 202 can be limited or precluded. This is because there is little or no slope to the line in
10 space that connects the leg tip 106a and the leg base 106b. In other words, there is no “lean” in the leg 104 between the leg tip 106a and the leg base 106b. However, if the leg tip 106a is positioned behind the leg base 106b (e.g., farther from the nose 108), then the device 100 can move faster, as the slope or lean of the legs 104 is increased, providing the motor 202 with a leg geometry that is more conducive to movement. In some implementations, different legs
15 104 (e.g., including different pairs, or left legs versus right legs) can have different distances between leg tips 106a and leg bases 106b.

In some implementations, the legs 104 are curved (e.g., leg 104a shown in FIG. 2A, and legs 104 shown in FIG. 1). For example, because the legs 104 are typically made from a flexible material, the curvature of the legs 104 can contribute to the forward motion of the
20 device 100. Curving the leg can accentuate the forward motion of the device 100 by increasing the amount that the leg compresses relative to a straight leg. This increased compression can also increase vehicle hopping, which can also increase the tendency for random motion, giving the device an appearance of intelligence and/or a more life-like operation. The legs can also have at least some degree of taper from the leg base 106b to the
25 leg tip 106a, which can facilitate easier removal from a mold during the manufacturing process.

The number of legs can vary in different implementations. In general, increasing the number of legs 104 can have the effect of making the device more stable and can help reduce fatigue on the legs that are in contact with the surface 110. Increasing the number of legs can
30 also affect the location of drag on the device 100 if additional leg tips 106a are in contact with the surface 110. In some implementations, however, some of the legs (e.g., middle legs 104b) can be at least slightly shorter than others so that they tend not to touch the surface 110 or contribute less to overall friction that results from the leg tips 106a touching the surface 110. For example, in some implementations, the two front legs 104a (e.g., the “driving” legs)

and at least one of the rear legs 104c are at least slightly longer than the other legs. This configuration helps increase speed by increasing the forward driving force of the driving legs. In general, the remaining legs 104 can help prevent the device 100 from tipping over by providing additional resiliency should the device 100 start to lean toward one side or the other.

In some implementations, one or more of the “legs” can include any portion of the device that touches the ground. For example, the device 100 can include a single rear leg (or multiple rear legs) constructed from a relatively inflexible material (e.g., rigid plastic), which can resemble the front legs or can form a skid plate designed to simply drag as the front legs 104a provide a forward driving force. The oscillating eccentric load can repeat tens to several hundred times per second, which causes the device 100 to move in a generally forward motion as a result of the forward momentum generated when F_v is negative.

Leg geometry can be defined and implemented based on ratios of various leg measurements, including leg length, diameter, and radius of curvature. One ratio that can be used is the ratio of the radius of curvature of the leg 104 to the leg’s length. As just one example, if the leg’s radius of curvature is 49.14mm and the leg’s length is 10.276mm, then the ratio is 4.78. In another example, if the leg’s radius of curvature is 2.0 inches and the leg’s length is 0.4 inches, then the ratio is 5.0. Other leg 104 lengths and radii of curvature can be used, such as to produce a ratio of the radius of curvature to the leg’s length that leads to suitable movement of the device 100. In general, the ratio of the radius of curvature to the leg’s length can be in the range of 2.5 to 20.0. The radius of curvature can be approximately consistent from the leg base to the leg tip. This approximate consistent curvature can include some variation, however. For example, some taper angle in the legs may be required during manufacturing of the device (e.g., to allow removal from a mold). Such a taper angle may introduce slight variations in the overall curvature that generally do not prevent the radius of curvature from being approximately consistent from the leg base to the leg tip.

Another ratio that can be used to characterize the device 100 is a ratio that relates leg 104 length to leg diameter or thickness (e.g., as measured in the center of the leg or as measured based on an average leg diameter throughout the length of the leg and/or about the circumference of the leg). For example, the length of the legs 104 can be in the range of 0.2 inches to 0.8 inches (e.g., 0.405 inches) and can be proportional to (e.g., 5.25 times) the leg’s thickness in the range of 0.03 to 0.15 inch (e.g., 0.077 inch). Stated another way, legs 104 can be about 15% to 25% as thick as they are long, although greater or lesser thicknesses (e.g., in the range of 5% to 60% of leg length) can be used. Leg 104 lengths and thicknesses

can further depend on the overall size of the device 100. In general, at least one driving leg can have a ratio of the leg length to the leg diameter in the range of 2.0 to 20.0 (i.e., in the range of 5% to 50% of leg length). In some implementations, a diameter of at least 10% of the leg length may be desirable to provide sufficient stiffness to support the weight of the device and/or to provide desired movement characteristics.

Leg Material

The legs are generally constructed of rubber or other flexible but resilient material (e.g., polystyrene-butadiene-styrene with a durometer near 65, based on the Shore A scale, or in the range of 55-75, based on the Shore A scale). Thus, the legs tend to deflect when a force is applied. Generally, the legs include a sufficient stiffness and resiliency to facilitate consistent forward movement as the device vibrates (e.g., as the eccentric load 210 rotates). The legs 104 are also sufficiently stiff to maintain a relatively wide stance when the device 100 is upright yet allow sufficient lateral deflection when the device 100 is on its side to facilitate self-righting, as further discussed below.

The selection of leg materials can have an effect on how the device 100 moves. For example, the type of material used and its degree of resiliency can affect the amount of bounce in the legs 104 that is caused by the vibration of the motor 202 and the counterweight 210. As a result, depending on the material's stiffness (among other factors, including positions of leg tips 106b relative to leg bases 106a), the speed of the device 100 can change. In general, the use of stiffer materials in the legs 104 can result in more bounce, while more flexible materials can absorb some of the energy caused by the vibration of the motor 202, which can tend to decrease the speed of the device 100.

Frictional Characteristics

Friction (or drag) force equals the coefficient of friction multiplied by normal force. Different coefficients of friction and the resulting friction forces can be used for different legs. As an example, to control the speed and direction (e.g., tendency to turn, etc.), the leg tips 106a can have varying coefficients of friction (e.g., by using different materials) or drag forces (e.g., by varying the coefficients of friction and/or the average normal force for a particular leg). These differences can be accomplished, for example, by the shape (e.g., pointedness or flatness, etc.) of the leg tips 106a as well as the material of which they are made. Front legs 104a, for example, can have a higher friction than the rear legs 104c. Middle legs 104b can have yet different friction or can be configured such that they are shorter and do not touch the surface 110, and thus do not tend to contribute to overall drag. Generally, because the rear legs 104c (and the middle legs 104b to the extent they touch the

ground) tend to drag more than they tend to create a forward driving force, lower coefficients of friction and lower drag forces for these legs can help increase the speed of the device 100. Moreover, to offset the motor force 215, which can tend to pull the device in a left or right direction, left and right legs 104 can have different friction forces. Overall, coefficients of friction and the resulting friction force of all of the legs 104 can influence the overall speed of the device 100. The number of legs 104 in the device 100 can also be used to determine coefficients of friction to have in (or design into) each of the individual legs 104. As discussed above, the middle legs 104b do not necessarily need to touch the surface 110. For example, middle (or front or back) legs 104 can be built into the device 100 for aesthetic reasons, e.g., to make the device 100 appear more life-like, and/or to increase device stability. In some implementations, devices 100 can be made in which only three (or a small number of) legs 104 touch the ground, such as two front legs 104a and one or two rear legs 104c.

The motor 202 is coupled to and rotates a counterweight 210, or eccentric load, that has a CG that is off axis relative to the rotational axis of the motor 202. The rotational motor 202 and counterweight 210, in addition to being adapted to propel the device 100, can also cause the device 100 to tend to roll, e.g., about the axis of rotation of the rotational motor 200. The rotational axis of the motor 202 can have an axis that is approximately aligned with a longitudinal CG of the device 100, which is also generally aligned with a direction of movement of the device 100.

FIG. 2A also shows a battery 220 and a switch 222. The battery 220 can provide power to the motor 202, for example, when the switch 222 is in the “ON” position, thus connecting an electrical circuit that delivers electric current to the motor 202. In the “OFF” position of the switch 222, the circuit is broken, and no power reaches the motor 202. The battery 220 can be located within or above a battery compartment cover 224, accessible, for example, by removing a screw 226, as shown in FIGS. 2A and 2D. The placement of the battery 220 and the switch 222 partially between the legs of the device 100 can lower the device’s CG and help to prevent tipping. Locating the motor 202 lower within the device 100 also reduces tipping. Having legs 104 on the sides of a vehicle 100 provides a space (e.g., between the legs 104) to house the battery 220, the motor 204 and the switch 222. Positioning these components 204, 220 and 222 along the underside of the device 100 (e.g., rather than on top of the device housing) effectively lowers the CG of the device 100 and reduces its likelihood of tipping.

The device 100 can be configured such that the CG is selectively positioned to influence the behavior of the device 100. For example, a lower CG can help to prevent

tipping of the device 100 during its operation. As an example, tipping can occur as a result of the device 100 moving at a high rate of speed and crashing into an obstacle. In another example, tipping can occur if the device 100 encounters a sufficiently irregular area of the surface on which it is operating. The CG of the device 100 can be selectively manipulated by positioning the motor, switch, and battery in locations that provide a desired CG, e.g., one that reduces the likelihood of inadvertent tipping. In some implementations, the legs can be configured so that they extend from the leg tip 106a below the CG to a leg base 106b that is above the CG, allowing the device 100 to be more stable during its operation. The components of the device 100 (e.g., motor, switch, battery, and housing) can be located at least partially between the legs to maintain a lower CG. In some implementations, the components of the device (e.g., motor, switch and battery) can be arranged or aligned close to the CG to maximize forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210.

Self-Righting

Self-righting, or the ability to return to an upright position (e.g., standing on legs 104), is another feature of the device 100. For example, the device 100 can occasionally tip over or fall (e.g., falling off a table or a step). As a result, the device 100 can end up on its top or its side. In some implementations, self-righting can be accomplished using the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 to cause the device 100 to roll over back onto its legs 104. Achieving this result can be helped by locating the device's CG proximal to the motor's rotational axis to increase the tendency for the entire device 100 to roll. This self-righting generally provides for rolling in the direction that is opposite to the rotation of the motor 202 and the counterweight 210.

Provided that a sufficient level of roll tendency is produced based on the rotational forces resulting from the rotation of the motor 202 and the counterweight 210, the outer shape of the device 100 can be designed such that rolling tends to occur only when the device 100 is on its right side, top side, or left side. For example, the lateral spacing between the legs 104 can be made wide enough to discourage rolling when the device 100 is already in the upright position. Thus, the shape and position of the legs 104 can be designed such that, when self-righting occurs and the device 100 again reaches its upright position after tipping or falling, the device 100 tends to remain upright. In particular, by maintaining a flat and relatively wide stance in the upright position, upright stability can be increased, and, by introducing features that reduce flatness when not in an upright position, the self-righting capability can be increased.

To assist rolling from the top of the device 100, a high point 120 or a protrusion can

be included on the top of the device 100. The high point 120 can prevent the device from resting flat on its top. In addition, the high point 120 can prevent F_h from becoming parallel to the force of gravity, and as a result, F_h can provide enough moment to cause the device to roll, enabling the device 100 to roll to an upright position or at least to the side of the device 100. In some implementations, the high point 120 can be relatively stiff (e.g., a relatively hard plastic), while the top surface of the head 118 can be constructed of a more resilient material that encourages bouncing. Bouncing of the head 118 of the device when the device is on its back can facilitate self-righting by allowing the device 100 to roll due to the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 as the head 118 bounces off the surface 110.

Rolling from the side of the device 100 to an upright position can be facilitated by using legs 104 that are sufficiently flexible in combination with the space 124 (e.g., underneath the device 100) for lateral leg deflection to allow the device 100 to roll to an upright position. This space can allow the legs 104 to bend during the roll, facilitating a smooth transition from side to bottom. The shoulders 112 on the device 100 can also decrease the tendency for the device 100 to roll from its side onto its back, at least when the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 are in a direction that opposes rolling from the side to the back. At the same time, the shoulder on the other side of the device 100 (even with the same configuration) can be designed to avoid preventing the device 100 from rolling onto its back when the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 are in a direction that encourages rolling in that direction. Furthermore, use of a resilient material for the shoulder can increase bounce, which can also increase the tendency for self-righting (e.g., by allowing the device 100 to bounce off the surface 110 and allowing the counterweight forces to roll the device while airborne). Self-righting from the side can further be facilitated by adding appendages along the side(s) of the device 100 that further separate the rotational axis from the surface and increase the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210.

The position of the battery on the device 100 can affect the device's ability to roll and right itself. For example, the battery can be oriented on its side, positioned in a plane that is both parallel to the device's direction of movement and perpendicular to the surface 110 when the device 100 is upright. This positioning of the battery in this manner can facilitate reducing the overall width of the device 100, including the lateral distance between the legs 104, making the device 100 more likely to be able to roll.

FIG. 4 shows an example front view indicating a center of gravity (CG) 402, as

indicated by a large plus sign, for the device 100. This view illustrates a longitudinal CG 402 (i.e., a location of a longitudinal axis of the device 100 that runs through the device CG). In some implementations, the vehicle's components are aligned to place the longitudinal CG close to (e.g., within 5-10% as a percentage of the height of the vehicle) the physical longitudinal centerline of the vehicle, which can reduce the rotational moment of inertia of the vehicle, thereby increasing or maximizing the forces on the vehicle as the rotational motor rotates the eccentric load. As discussed above, this effect increases the tendency of the device 100 to roll, which can enhance the self-righting capability of the device. FIG. 4 also shows a space 404 between the legs 104 and the underside 122 of the vehicle 100 (including the battery compartment cover 224), which can allow the legs 104 to bend inward when the device is on its side, thereby facilitating self-righting of the device 100. FIG. 4 also illustrates a distance 406 between the pairs or rows of legs 104. Increasing the distance 406 can help prevent the vehicle 100 from tipping. However, keeping the distance 406 sufficiently low, combined with flexibility of the legs 104, can improve the vehicle's ability to self-right after tipping. In general, to prevent tipping, the distance 406 between pairs of legs needs to be increased proportionally as the CG 402 is raised.

The vehicle high point 120 is also shown in FIG. 4. The size or height of the high point 120 can be sufficiently large enough to prevent the device 100 from simply lying flat on its back after tipping, yet sufficiently small enough to help facilitate the device's roll and to force the device 100 off its back after tipping. A larger or higher high point 120 can be better tolerated if combined with "pectoral fins" or other side protrusions to increase the "roundness" of the device.

The tendency to roll of the device 100 can depend on the general shape of the device 100. For example, a device 100 that is generally cylindrical, particularly along the top of the device 100, can roll relatively easily. Even if the top of the device is not round, as is the case for the device shown in FIG. 4 that includes straight top sides 407a and 407b, the geometry of the top of the device 100 can still facilitate rolling. This is especially true if distances 408 and 410 are relatively equal and each approximately defines the radius of the generally cylindrical shape of the device 100. Distance 408, for example, is the distance from the device's longitudinal CG 402 to the top of the shoulder 112. Distance 410 is the distance from the device's longitudinal CG 402 to the high point 120. Further, having a length of surface 407b (i.e., between the top of the shoulder 112 and the high point 120) that is less than the distances 408 and 410 can also increase the tendency of the device 100 to roll. Moreover, if the device's longitudinal CG 402 is positioned relatively close to the center of

the cylinder that approximates the general shape of the device 100, then roll of the device 100 is further enhanced, as the forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 are generally more centered. The device 100 can stop rolling once the rolling action places the device 100 on its legs 104, which provide a wide stance and serve to interrupt the generally cylindrical shape of the device 100.

FIG. 5 shows an example side view indicating a center of gravity (CG) 502, as indicated by a large plus sign, for the device 100. This view also shows a motor axis 504 which, in this example, closely aligns with the longitudinal component of the CG 502. The location of the CG 502 depends on, e.g., the mass, thickness, and distribution of the materials and components included in the device 100. In some implementations, the CG 502 can be farther forward or farther back from the location shown in FIG. 5. For example, the CG 502 can be located toward the rear end of the switch 222 rather than toward the front end of the switch 222 as illustrated in FIG. 5. In general, the CG 502 of the device 100 can be sufficiently far behind the front driving legs 104a and the rotating eccentric load (and sufficiently far in front of the rear legs 104c) to facilitate front hopping and rear drag, which can increase forward drive and provide a controlled tendency to go straight (or turn if desired) during hops. For example, the CG 502 can be positioned roughly halfway (e.g., in the range of roughly 40-60% of the distance) between the front driving legs 104a and the rear dragging legs 104c. Also, aligning the motor axis with the longitudinal CG can enhance forces caused by the motor 202 and the counterweight. In some implementations, the longitudinal component of the CG 502 can be near to the center of the height of the device (e.g., within about 3% of the CG as a proportion of the height of the device). Generally, configuring the device 100 such that the CG 502 is closer to the center of the height of the device will enhance the rolling tendency, although greater distances (e.g., within about 5% or within about 20% of the CG as a proportion of the height of the device) are acceptable in some implementations. Similarly, configuring the device 100 such that the CG 502 is within about 3-6% of the motor axis 504 as a percentage of the height of the device can also enhance the rolling tendency.

FIG. 5 also shows an approximate alignment of the battery 220, the switch 222 and the motor 202 with the longitudinal component of the CG 502. Although a sliding switch mechanism 506 that operates the on/off switch 222 hangs below the underside of the device 100, the overall approximate alignment of the CG of the individual components 220, 222 and 202 (with each other and with the CG 502 of the overall device 100) contributes to the ability of the device 100 to roll, and thus right itself. In particular, the motor 202 is centered

primarily along the longitudinal component of the CG 502.

In some implementations, the high point 120 can be located behind the CG 502, which can facilitate self-righting in combination with the eccentric load attached to the motor 202 being positioned near the nose 108. As a result, if the device 100 is on its side or back, the nose end of the device 100 tends to vibrate and bounce (more so than the tail end of the device 100), which facilitates self-righting as the forces of the motor and eccentric load tend to cause the device to roll.

FIG. 5 also shows some of the sample dimensions of the device 100. For example, a distance 508 between the CG 502 and a plane that passes through the leg tips 106a on which the device 100 rests when upright on a flat surface 110 can be approximately 0.36 inches. In some implementations, this distance 508 is approximately 50% of the total height of the device (see FIGS. 7A & 7B), although other distances 508 may be used in various implementations (e.g., from about 40-60%). A distance 510 between the rotational axis 504 of the motor 202 and the same plane that passes through the leg tips 106a is approximately the same as the distance 508, although variations (e.g., 0.34 inches for distance 510 vs. 0.36 inches for distance 508) may be used without materially impacting desired functionality. Greater variations (e.g., 0.05 inches or even 0.1 inches) may be used in some implementations.

A distance 512 between the leg tip 106a of the front driving legs 104a and the leg tip 106a of the rearmost leg 104c can be approximately 0.85 inches, although various implementations can include other values of the distance 512 (e.g., between about 40% and about 75% of the length of the device 100). In some implementations, locating the front driving legs 104a behind the eccentric load 210 can facilitate forward driving motion and randomness of motion. For example, a distance 514 between a longitudinal centerline of the eccentric load 210 and the tip 106a of the front leg 104a can be approximately 0.36 inches. Again, other distances 514 can be used (e.g., between about 5% and about 30% of the length of the device 100 or between about 10% and about 60% of the distance 512). A distance 516 between the front of the device 100 and the CG 502 can be about 0.95 inches. In various implementations, the distance 516 may range from about 40-60% of the length of the device 100, although some implementations may include front or rear protrusions with a low mass that add to the length of the device but do not significantly impact the location of the CG 502 (i.e., therefore causing the CG 502 to be outside of the 40-60% range).

FIGS. 9A and 9B show example devices 100y and 100z that include, respectively, a shark/dorsal fin 902 and side/pectoral fins 904a and 904b. As shown in FIG. 9A, the

shark/dorsal fin 902 can extend upward from the body 102 so that, if the device 100y tips, then the device 100y will not end up on its back and can right itself. The side/pectoral fins 904a and 904b shown in FIG. 9B extend partially outward from the body 102. As a result, if the device 100z begins to tip to the device's left or right, then the fin on that side (e.g., fin 904a or fin 904b) can stop and reverse the tipping action, returning the device 100z to its upright position. In addition, the fins 904a and 904b can facilitate self-righting by increasing the distance between the CG and the surface when the device is on its side. This effect can be enhanced when the fins 904a and 904b are combined with a dorsal fin 902 on a single device. In this way, fins 902, 904a and 904b can enhance the self-righting of the devices 100y and 100z. Constructing the fins 902, 904a and 904b from a resilient material that increases bounce when the fins are in contact with a surface can also facilitate self-righting (e.g., to help overcome the wider separation between the tips of the fins 902, 904a and 904b). Fins 902, 904a and 904b can be constructed of light-weight rubber or plastic so as not to significantly change the device's CG.

Random Motion

By introducing features that increase randomness of motion of the device 100, the device 100 can appear to behave in an animate way, such as like a crawling bug or other organic life-form. The random motion can include inconsistent movements, for example, rather than movements that tend to be in straight lines or continuous circles. As a result, the device 100 can appear to roam about its surroundings (e.g. in an erratic or serpentine pattern) instead of moving in predictable patterns. Random motion can occur, for example, even while the device 100 is moving in one general direction.

In some implementations, randomness can be achieved by changing the stiffness of the legs 104, the material used to make the legs 104, and/or by adjusting the inertial load on various legs 104. For example, as leg stiffness is reduced, the amount of device hopping can be reduced, thus reducing the appearance of random motion. When the legs 104 are relatively stiff, the legs 104 tend to induce hopping, and the device 100 can move in a more inconsistent and random motion.

While the material that is selected for the legs 104 can influence leg stiffness, it can also have other effects. For example, the leg material can be manipulated to attract dust and debris at or near the leg tips 106a, where the legs 104 contact the surface 110. This dust and debris can cause the device 100 to turn randomly and change its pattern of motion. This can occur because the dust and debris can alter the typical frictional characteristics of the legs 104.

The inertial load on each leg 104 can also influence randomness of motion of the device 100. As an example, as the inertial load on a particular leg 104 is increased, that portion of the device 100 can hop at higher amplitude, causing the device 100 to land in different locations.

5 In some implementations, during a hop and while at least some legs 104 of the device 100 are airborne (or at least applying less force to the surface 110), the motor 202 and the counterweight 210 can cause some level of mid-air turning and/or rotating of the device 100. This can provide the effect of the device landing or bouncing in unpredictable ways, which can further lead to random movement.

10 In some implementations, additional random movement can result from locating front driving legs 104a (i.e., the legs that primarily propel the device 100 forward) behind the motor's counterweight. This can cause the front of the device 100 to tend to move in a less straight direction because the counterweight is farther from legs 104 that would otherwise tend to absorb and control its energy. An example lateral distance from the center of the
15 counterweight to the tip of the first leg of 0.36 inches compared to an example leg length of 0.40 inches. Generally, the distance 514 from the longitudinal centerline of the counterweight to the tip 106a of the front leg 104a may be approximately the same as the length of the leg but the distance 514 can vary in the range of 50-150% of the leg length.

20 In some implementations, additional appendages can be added to the legs 104 (and to the housing 102) to provide resonance. For example, flexible protrusions that are constantly in motion in this way can contribute to the overall randomness of motion of the device 100 and/or to the lifelike appearance of the device 100. Using appendages of different sizes and flexibilities can magnify the effect.

25 In some implementations, the battery 220 can be positioned near the rear of the device 100 to increase hop. Doing so positions the weight of the battery 220 over the rearmost legs 104, reducing load on the front legs 104a, which can allow for more hop at the front legs 104a. In general, the battery 220 can tend to be heavier than the switch 222 and motor 202, thus placement of the battery 220 nearer the rear of the device 100 can elevate the nose 108, allowing the device 100 to move faster.

30 In some implementations, the on/off switch 222 can be oriented along the bottom side of the device 100 between the battery 220 and the motor 204 such that the switch 222 can be moved back and forth laterally. Such a configuration, for example, helps to facilitate reducing the overall length of the device 100. Having a shorter device can enhance the tendency for random motion.

Speed of Movement

In addition to random motion, the speed of the device 100 can contribute to the life-like appearance of the device 100. Factors that affect speed include the vibration frequency and amplitude that are produced by the motor 202 and counterweight 210, the materials used to make the legs 104, leg length and deflection properties, differences in leg geometry, and the number of legs.

Vibration frequency (e.g., based on motor rotation speed) and device speed are generally directly proportional. That is, when the oscillating frequency of the motor 202 is increased and all other factors are held constant, the device 100 will tend to move faster. An example oscillating frequency of the motor is in the range of 7000 to 9000 rpm.

Leg material has several properties that contribute to speed. Leg material friction properties influence the magnitude of drag force on the device. As the coefficient of friction of the legs increases, the device's overall drag will increase, causing the device 100 to slow down. As such, the use of leg material having properties promoting low friction can increase the speed of the device 100. In some implementations, polystyrene-butadiene-styrene with a durometer near 65 (e.g., based on the Shore A scale) can be used for the legs 104. Leg material properties also contribute to leg stiffness which, when combined with leg thickness and leg length, determines how much hop a device 100 will develop. As the overall leg stiffness increases, the device speed will increase. Longer and thinner legs will reduce leg stiffness, thus slowing the device's speed.

Appearance of Intelligence

"Intelligent" response to obstacles is another feature of the device 100. For example, "intelligence" can prevent a device 100 that comes in contact with an immovable object (e.g., a wall) from futilely pushing against the object. The "intelligence" can be implemented using mechanical design considerations alone, which can obviate the need to add electronic sensors, for example. For example, turns (e.g., left or right) can be induced using a nose 108 that introduces a deflection or bounce in which a device 100 that encounters an obstacle immediately turns to a near incident angle.

In some implementations, adding a "bounce" to the device 100 can be accomplished through design considerations of the nose and the legs 104, and the speed of the device 100. For example, the nose 108 can include a spring-like feature. In some implementations, the nose 108 can be manufactured using rubber, plastic, or other materials (e.g., polystyrene-butadiene-styrene with a durometer near 65, or in the range of 55-75, based on the Shore A scale). The nose 108 can have a pointed, flexible shape that deflects inward under pressure.

Design and configuration of the legs 104 can allow for a low resistance to turning during a nose bounce. Bounce achieved by the nose can be increased, for example, when the device 100 has a higher speed and momentum.

In some implementations, the resiliency of the nose 108 can be such that it has an added benefit of dampening a fall should the device 100 fall off a surface 110 (e.g., a table) and land on its nose 108.

FIG. 6 shows a top view of the vehicle 100 and further shows the flexible nose 108. Depending on the shape and resiliency of the nose 108, the vehicle 100 can more easily deflect off obstacles and remain upright, instead of tipping. The nose 108 can be constructed from rubber or some other relatively resilient material that allows the device to bounce off obstacles. Further, a spring or other device can be placed behind the surface of the nose 108 that can provide an extra bounce. A void or hollow space 602 behind the nose 108 can also contribute to the device's ability to deflect off of obstacles that are encountered nose-first.

Alternative Leg Configurations

FIGS. 3A-3C show various examples of alternative leg configurations for devices 100a-100k. The devices 100a-100k primarily show leg 104 variations but can also include the components and features described above for the device 100. As depicted in FIGS. 3A-3C, the forward direction of movement is left-to-right for all of the devices 100a-100k, as indicated by direction arrows 302a-302c. The device 100a shows legs connected with webs 304. The webs 304 can serve to increase the stiffness of the legs 104 while maintaining legs 104 that appear long. The webs 304 can be anywhere along the legs 104 from the top (or base) to the bottom (or tip). Adjusting these webs 304 differently or on the device's right versus the left can serve to change leg characteristics without adjusting leg length and provide an alternate method of correcting steering. The device 100b shows a common configuration with multiple curved legs 104. In this implementation, the middle legs 104b may not touch the ground, which can make production tuning of the legs easier by eliminating unneeded legs from consideration. Devices 100c and 100d show additional appendages 306 that can add an additional life-like appearance to the devices 100c and 100d. The appendages 306 on the front legs can resonate as the devices 100c and 100d move. As described above, adjusting these appendages 306 to create a desired resonance can serve to increase randomness in motion.

Additional leg configurations are shown in FIG. 3B. The devices 100e and 100f show leg connections to the body that can be at various locations compared to the devices 100a-100d in FIG. 3A. Aside from aesthetic differences, connecting the legs 104 higher on the

device's body can serve to make the legs 104 appear to be longer without raising the CG. Longer legs 104 generally have a reduced stiffness that can reduce hopping, among other characteristics. The device 100f also includes front appendages 306. The device 100g shows an alternate rear leg configuration where the two rear legs 104 are connected, forming a loop.

5 Additional leg configurations are shown in FIG. 3C. The device 100h shows the minimum number of (e.g., three) legs 104. Positioning the rear leg 104 right or left acts as a rudder changing the steering of the device 100h. Using a rear leg 104 made of a low friction material can increase the device's speed as previously described. The device 100j is three-legged device with the single leg 104 at the front. Steering can be adjusted on the rear legs
10 by moving one forward of the other. The device 100i includes significantly altered rear legs 104 that make the device 100i appear more like a grasshopper. These legs 104 can function similar to legs 104 on the device 100k, where the middle legs 104b are raised and function only aesthetically until they work in self-righting the device 100k during a rollover situation.

In some implementations, devices 100 can include adjustment features, such as
15 adjustable legs 104. For example, if a consumer purchases a set of devices 100 that all have the same style (e.g., an ant), the consumer may want to make some or all of the devices 100 move in varying ways. In some implementations, the consumer can lengthen or shorten individual leg 104 by first loosening a screw (or clip) that holds the leg 104 in place. The consumer can then slide the leg 104 up or down and retighten the screw (or clip). For
20 example, referring for FIG. 3B, screws 310a and 310b can be loosened for repositioning legs 104a and 104c, and then tightened again when the legs are in the desired place.

In some implementations, screw-like threaded ends on leg bases 106b along with corresponding threaded holes in the device housing 102 can provide an adjustment mechanism for making the legs 104 longer or shorter. For example, by turning the front legs
25 104a to change the vertical position of the legs bases 106b (i.e., in the same way that turning a screw in a threaded hole changes the position of the screw), the consumer can change the length of the front legs 104a, thus altering the behavior of the device 100.

In some implementations, the leg base 106b ends of adjustable legs 104 can be mounted within holes in housing 102 of the device 100. The material (e.g., rubber) from
30 which the legs are constructed along with the size and material of the holes in the housing 102 can provide sufficient friction to hold the legs 104 in position, while still allowing the legs to be pushed or pulled through the holes to new adjusted positions.

In some implementations, in addition to using adjustable legs 104, variations in movement can be achieved by slightly changing the CG, which can serve to alter the effect of

the vibration of the motor 202. This can have the effect of making the device move slower or faster, as well as changing the device's tendency to turn. Providing the consumer with adjustment options can allow different devices 100 to move differently.

Device Dimensions

FIGS. 7A and 7B show example dimensions of the device 100. For example, a length 702 is approximately 1.73 inches, a width 704 from leg tip to leg tip is approximately 0.5 inches, and a height 706 is approximately .681 inches. A leg length 708 can be approximately 0.4 inches, and a leg diameter 710 can be approximately 0.077 inches. A radius of curvature (shown generally at 712) can be approximately 1.94 inches. Other dimensions can also be used. In general, the device length 702 can be in the range from two to five times the width 704 and the height 706 can be in the approximate range from one to two times the width 704. The leg length 708 can be in the range of three to ten times the leg diameter 710. There is no physical limit to the overall size that the device 100 can be scaled to, as long as motor and counterweight forces are scaled appropriately. In general, it may be beneficial to use dimensions substantially proportional to the illustrated dimensions. Such proportions may provide various benefits, including enhancing the ability of the device 100 to right itself after tipping and facilitating desirable movement characteristics (e.g., tendency to travel in a straight line, etc.).

Construction Materials

Material selection for the legs is based on several factors that affect performance. The materials main parameters are coefficient of friction (COF), flexibility and resilience. These parameters in combination with the shape and length of the leg affect speed and the ability to control the direction of the device.

COF can be significant in controlling the direction and movement of the device. The COF is generally high enough to provide resistance to sideways movement (e.g., drifting or floating) while the apparatus is moving forward. In particular, the COF of the leg tips (i.e., the portion of the legs that contact a support surface) can be sufficient to substantially eliminate drifting in a lateral direction (i.e., substantially perpendicular to the direction of movement) that might otherwise result from the vibration induced by the rotating eccentric load. The COF can also be high enough to avoid significant slipping to provide forward movement when F_v is down and the legs provide a forward push. For example, as the legs bend toward the back of the device 100 (e.g., away from the direction of movement) due to the net downward force on the one or more driving legs (or other legs) induced by the rotation of the eccentric load, the COF is sufficient to prevent substantial slipping between

the leg tip and the support surface. In another situation, the COF can be low enough to allow the legs to slide (if contacting the ground) back to their normal position when F_v is positive. For example, the COF is sufficient low that, as the net forces on the device 100 tend to cause the device to hop, the resiliency of the legs 104 cause the legs to tend to return to a neutral position without inducing a sufficient force opposite the direction of movement to overcome either or both of a frictional force between one or more of the other legs (e.g., back legs 104c) in contact with the support surface or momentum of the device 100 resulting from the forward movement of the device 100. In some instances, the one or more driving legs 104a can leave (i.e., hop completely off) the support surface, which allows the driving legs to return to a neutral position without generating a backward frictional force. Nonetheless, the driving legs 104a may not leave the support surface every time the device 100 hops and/or the legs 104 may begin to slide forward before the legs leave the surface. In such cases, the legs 104 may move forward without causing a significant backward force that overcomes the forward momentum of the device 100.

Flexibility and resilience are generally selected to provide desired leg movement and hop. Flexibility of the leg can allow the legs to bend and compress when F_v is down and the nose moves down. Resilience of the material can provide an ability to release the energy absorbed by bending and compression, increasing the forward movement speed. The material can also avoid plastic deformation while flexing.

Rubber is an example of one type of material that can meet these criteria, however, other materials (e.g., other elastomers) may have similar properties.

FIG. 8 shows example materials that can be used for the device 100. In the example implementation of the device 100 shown in FIG. 8, the legs 104 are molded from rubber or another elastomer. The legs 104 can be injection molded such that multiple legs are integrally molded substantially simultaneously (e.g., as part of the same mold). The legs 104 can be part of a continuous or integral piece of rubber that also forms the nose 108 (including nose sides 116a and 116b), the body shoulder 112, and the head side surface 114. As shown, the integral piece of rubber extends above the body shoulder 112 and the head side surface 114 to regions 802, partially covering the top surface of the device 100. For example, the integral rubber portion of the device 100 can be formed and attached (i.e., co-molded during the manufacturing process) over a plastic top of the device 100, exposing areas of the top that are indicated by plastic regions 806, such that the body forms an integrally co-molded piece. The high point 120 is formed by the uppermost plastic regions 806. One or more rubber regions 804, separate from the continuous rubber piece that includes the legs 104, can cover

portions of the plastic regions 806. In general, the rubber regions 802 and 804 can be a different color than plastic regions 806, which can provide a visually distinct look to the device 100. In some implementations, the patterns formed by the various regions 802-806 can form patterns that make the device look like a bug or other animate object. In some
5 implementations, different patterns of materials and colors can be used to make the device 100 resemble different types of bugs or other objects. In some implementations, a tail (e.g., made of string) can be attached to the back end of the device 100 to make the device appear to be a small rodent.

The selection of materials used (e.g., elastomer, rubber, plastic, etc.) can have a
10 significant effect on the vehicle's ability to self-right. For example, rubber legs 104 can bend inward when the device 100 is rolling during the time it is self-righting. Moreover, rubber legs 104 can have sufficient resiliency to bend during operation of the vehicle 100, including flexing in response to the motion of (and forces created by) the eccentric load rotated by the motor 202. Furthermore, the tips of the legs 104, also being made of rubber, can have a
15 coefficient of friction that allows the driving legs (e.g., the front legs 104) to push against the surface 110 without significantly slipping.

Using rubber for the nose 108 and shoulder 112 can also help the device 100 to self-right. For example, a material such as rubber, having higher elasticity and resiliency than hard plastic, for example, can help the nose 108 and shoulder 112 bounce, which facilitates
20 self righting, by reducing resistance to rolling while the device 100 is airborne. In one example, if the device 100 is placed on its side while the motor 202 is running, and if the motor 202 and eccentric load are positioned near the nose 108, the rubber surfaces of the nose 108 and shoulder 112 can cause at least the nose of the device 100 to bounce and lead to self-righting of the device 100.

In some implementations, the one or more rear legs 104c can have a different
25 coefficient of friction than that of the front legs 104a. For example, the legs 104 in general can be made of different materials and can be attached to the device 100 as different pieces. In some implementations, the rear legs 104c can be part of a single molded rubber piece that includes all of the legs 104, and the rear legs 104c can be altered (e.g., dipped in a coating) to
30 change their coefficient of friction.

While this specification contains many specific implementation details, these should not be construed as limitations on the scope of any inventions or of what may be claimed, but rather as descriptions of features specific to particular embodiments of particular inventions. Certain features that are described in this specification in the context of separate

embodiments can also be implemented in combination in a single embodiment. Conversely, various features that are described in the context of a single embodiment can also be implemented in multiple embodiments separately or in any suitable subcombination. Moreover, although features may be described above as acting in certain combinations and
5 even initially claimed as such, one or more features from a claimed combination can in some cases be excised from the combination, and the claimed combination may be directed to a subcombination or variation of a subcombination. Other alternative embodiments can also be implemented. For example, some implementations of the device 100 can omit the use of rubber. Some implementations of the device 100 can include components (e.g., made of
10 plastic) that include glow-in-the-dark qualities so that the device 100 can be seen in a darkened room as it moves across the surface 110 (e.g., a kitchen floor). Some implementations of the device 100 can include a light (e.g., an LED bulb) that blinks intermittently as the device 100 travels across the surface 110.

FIG. 10 is a flow diagram of a process 1000 for operating a vibration-powered device
15 100 (e.g., a device that includes any appropriate combination of the features described above). The device can include any appropriate combination of features, as described above. In various embodiments, different subsets of the features described above can be included.

Initially, a vibration-powered device is placed on a substantially flat surface at 1005. Vibration of the device is induced at 1010 to cause forward movement. For example,
20 vibration may be induced using a rotational motor (e.g., battery powered or wind up) that rotates a counterweight. The vibration can induce movement in a direction corresponding to an offset between the leg bases and the leg tips of one or more driving legs (i.e., the forward direction). In particular, this vibration can cause resilient legs to bend in one direction, at
1015, as the net downward forces cause the device to move downward. This bending, along
25 with using a material with a sufficiently high coefficient of friction to avoid substantial slipping, can cause the device to move generally forward.

As the vibration causes net upward forces (e.g., due to the vector sum of the forces induced by the rotating counterweight and the spring effect of the resilient legs) that cause the driving legs to leave the surface or to come close to leaving the surface, the tips of the one or
30 more driving legs move in the forward direction (i.e., the leg deflects in the forward direction to return to a neutral position) at 1020. In some implementations, the one or more driving legs can leave the surface at varying intervals. For example, the driving legs may not leave the surface every time the net forces are upward because the forces may not overcome a downward momentum from a previous hop. In addition, the amount of time the driving legs

leave the surface may vary for different hops (e.g., depending on the height of the hop, which in turn may depend on the degree to which the rotation of the counterweight is in phase with the spring of the legs).

During the forward motion of the device, different drag forces on each lateral side of the device can be generated at 1025. Generally, these different drag forces can be generated by rear legs that tend to drag (or at least that drag more than front driving legs) and alter the turning characteristics of the device (e.g., to counteract or enhance turning tendencies). Typically, the legs can be arranged in (e.g., two) rows along each lateral side of the device, such that one or more of the legs in one row drag more than corresponding legs in another row. Different techniques for causing the device to generate these different drag forces are described above.

If the device overturns, rolling of the device is induced at 1030. In general, this rolling tendency can be induced by the rotation of the counterweight and causes the device to tend to independently right itself. As discussed above, the outer shape of the device along the longitudinal dimension (e.g., substantially parallel to the axis of rotation and/or the general forward direction of movement of the device) can be shaped to promote rolling (e.g., by emulating longitudinal “roundness”). Rolling of the device can also be stopped by a relatively wide spread between the rows of legs at 1035. In particular, if the legs are wide enough relative to the COG of the device, the rotational forces generated by the rotating counterweight are generally insufficient (absent additional forces) to cause the device to roll over from the upright position.

At 1040, resiliency of the nose of the device can induce a bounce when the device encounters an obstacle (e. g., a wall). This tendency to bounce can facilitate changing directions to turn away from an obstacle or toward a higher angle of incidence, particularly when combined with a pointed shaped nose as discussed above. The resilient nose can be constructed from a elastomeric material and can be integrally molded along with lateral shoulders and/or legs using the same elastomeric material. Finally, lateral drifting can be suppressed at 1045 based on a sufficiently high coefficient of friction at the leg tips, which can prevent the legs from tending to slide laterally as the rotating counterweight generates lateral forces.

FIG. 11 is a flow diagram of a process 1100 for constructing a vibration-powered device 100 (e.g., a device that includes any appropriate combination of the features described above). Initially, the device undercarriage is molded at 1105. The device undercarriage can be the underside 122 shown in FIG. 1 and can be constructed from a hard plastic or other

relatively hard or stiff material, although the type of material used for the underside is generally not particularly critical to the operation of the device. An upper shell is also molded at 1110. The upper shell can include a relatively hard portion of the upper body portion of the housing 102 shown in FIG. 1, including the high point 120. The upper shell is co-molded with an elastomeric body at 1115 to form the device upper body. The elastomeric body can include a single integrally formed piece that includes legs 104, shoulders 112, and nose 108. Co-molding a hard upper shell and a more resilient elastomeric body can provide better constructability (e.g., the hard portion can make it easier to attach to the device undercarriage using screws or posts), provide more longitudinal stiffness, can facilitate self-righting (as explained above), and can provide legs that facilitate hopping, forward movement, and turning adjustments. The housing is assembled at 1120. The housing generally includes a battery, a switch, a rotational motor, and an eccentric load, which may all be enclosed between the device undercarriage and the upper body.

The ability of the device to simulate life-like features can be extended by providing a user configurable playset (e.g., that imitates an insect colony or ant farm). The playset can be used to study cause and effect in autonomous vehicle interaction and flow where the user provides flow control and colony configuration. For example, the playset can contain various flow elements that can be pieced together to direct devices along particular paths (e.g., similar to slot car tracks or toy train tracks). The flow elements can include straight and curved pieces as desired. Unlike train sets and/or slot car sets, however, the playset of the present invention can also include communal areas designed to allow autonomous vehicle gathering and interaction. These communal areas can contain one or more in/out ports that allow the connection of flow elements. The communal area can include an internal open space or features that alter vehicle interactions, such as an array of posts, mazes, or other features. The in/out ports may contain flow control gates that block vehicles from passing, if desired. These gates can allow ports without a connected flow element to be blocked, ensuring that vehicles do not escape the playset. The gates can also be used to create communal areas with more or less in/out ports, thus allowing the studying of cause and effect relationship of autonomous vehicle flow.

FIG. 12 is a perspective view of a communal area playset component 1200. The communal area component 1200 includes a substantially horizontal planar floor 1202 and multiple side walls 1204. In some implementations, the side walls 1204 of the communal area component 1200 are straight along the inside of the communal area and form a substantially regular polygon. In some implementations, the side walls 1204 form a polygon

having at least five or six sides such that the corners where the side walls 1204 meet form an angle that helps prevent vibration-powered devices from getting stuck in the corner. The side wall components 1204 can be substantially perpendicular to the floor 1202 or can at least be sufficiently vertical to cause vibration-driven devices to deflect off of the side wall 1204 (e.g., by bouncing off the side wall 1204 with a resilient nose) or to otherwise turn back toward the middle of the communal area component 1200. The communal area component 1200 further includes a plurality of connectors 1206 that facilitate connecting the communal area component 1200 to another communal area component or to tracks, as further described below. In some implementations, each connector 1206 is shaped such that it is capable of interlocking with another identically shaped connector 1206. Each connector can also include tabs 1218 that are shaped to guide and hold the interlocking connectors 1206 in a proper position, while still allowing the interlocking connectors 1206 to be separated if sufficient force is applied (i.e., in the vertical direction for the type of connector illustrated).

Adjacent to each connector 1206 (or to at least some of the connectors) is a port 1208 that allows vibration-powered devices to pass through (e.g., either into or out of the communal area component 1200). The ports 1208 are disposed in a side wall 1204. In some implementations, the ports 1208 are a third or less of the width of the side wall 1204 on each side of the communal area component 1200. Each port can include a gate 1210 that can rotate or pivot between a closed position (as indicated at 1210a), a partially open position (as indicated at 1210b), and a fully open position (as indicated at 1210c). Each side wall 1204 (at least on one side of the port 1208) includes a slot 1216 into which the gate 1210 for that side wall 1204 can rotate (or slide, in some implementations) to provide an open port 1208 through which vibration-powered devices can travel. The gate 1210 can include a lever projection 1212 that can make the gate easier to rotate (e.g., with a user's finger), and the side wall 1204 can include an indentation 1214 that makes the lever projection 1212 easier to contact (e.g., again with the user's finger) when the gate 1210 is in the fully open position. For example, each gate 1210 is adapted to be opened and closed by rotating the lever projection 1212 in an arc substantially perpendicular to the substantially planar area 1202 of the communal area 1200.

FIG. 13A is a perspective view of a straight track playset component 1300. The straight track component 1300 includes a substantially planar floor 1302 and side walls 1304 that form a U-shaped channel 1308 with open ends 1310. The side walls 1304 can be substantially vertical or at least sufficiently vertical to cause a vibration-powered device to deflect off of the side wall 1304 or to otherwise turn toward the middle of the track. In some

implementations, the side walls 1304 of the straight track component 1300 are separated by a substantially consistent distance between the open ends 1310. In some implementations, the side walls 1304 are spaced apart at a distance that is sufficiently wider than a vibration-powered device for which the track is designed (e.g., sold with the track or for which the track is an accessory) that the device can move back and forth to some degree. In some implementations, the channel 1308 is narrow enough to prevent the vibration-powered device from being able to turn around on the straight track component 1300 (e.g., the device is longer than the channel 1308 is wide).

The straight track component 1300 also includes connectors 1306, which can match the connectors 1206 of the communal area component 1200. When connected together in this manner, the end of the channel 1308 may substantially aligns horizontally with one of the ports 1208 and the floor 1302 of the channel substantially aligns vertically with the substantially planar area 1202 of the communal area component 1200. The straight track component 1300 can further have tabs 1312 (matching the tabs 1218 in FIG. 12) that mate with portions of another connector 1206 (see FIG. 12), 1306, or 1406 (see FIG. 14) to “lock” the connectors in place. In particular, a projection on the lower end of the tabs 1312 can catch on the lower edge of a surface 1330 adjacent to the tab 1312 on a different connector 1306. The connector 1306, along with adjacent surfaces 1316, can interlock or mate with another connector 1306 and corresponding surfaces 1316 in a manner that substantially prevents the two interlocking components from twisting laterally relative to the other connector 1306. The straight track component 1300 can also include slots 1314 in the side walls 1306 along at least a portion (or portions) of the length of the component that facilitate insertion of accessories or other objects (e.g., to build taller walls or tunnels).

A vibration-powered vehicle, as described above behaves in a significantly different manner than a slot car or train in a track due to the existence of side forces F_h and at least slightly random, not straight, movement of the vehicle. These side forces can cause significant collisions with the track side walls 1304 in a channel-shaped track. These collisions (e.g., both on the right and left) cause the vehicle to oscillate sideways in the track and slow the motion of the vehicle due to friction during the collisions, particularly when the vehicle is constructed from rubber or other relatively higher friction material.

FIG. 13B is an end view of one implementation of a straight track component 1300. In this implementation, the side walls 1304 of the channel 1308 and the floor 1302 meet (at 138) at substantially a right angle. Such a construction tends to result in greater numbers of collisions with the side walls 1304.

An alternative track cross-section that eliminates side-to-side oscillation can also be used. An ordinary channel-shaped track, such as that shown in FIG. 13B, uses the sidewalls to deflect the vehicle body. This direct on or off contact causes undesired reflectance.

FIG. 13C is an end view or cross section of an alternative track channel 1308 for reducing side wall collisions. In this configuration, the floor 1302 includes an upward curvature 1320 adjacent to the side walls 1304. This upward curvature 1320 forms an altered (or alternative) floor that interacts with the vehicle legs. Viewed in a different manner, the track channel 1308 of FIG. 13C includes depression in the floor was added with gradual curves 1320 on the right and left sides. When the gradual curves 1320 contact the legs, the vehicle is gradually deflected toward a centerline 1322 of the channel 1308 to the correct course proportionally with its directional error, eliminating or at least reducing the oscillation. In some implementations, the upward curvature 1320 that is adjacent to the side wall 1304 can terminate in a flat horizontal surface as depicted in FIG. 13C, while in other cases the upward curvature 1320 can meet the corresponding adjacent side wall 1304. In some cases the upward curvature 1320, rather than being truly curve, can be formed by a flat surface at an angle to the floor 1302 and side wall 1304 (e.g., at a 45 degree angle to the plane of the side wall 1304 and the plane of the floor 1302) or by a series of flat surfaces that, when the channel is viewed in cross section, emulate a curve by forming a gradually steeper surface as the surfaces approach the side wall 1304.

FIG. 14 is a perspective view of a curved track playset component 1400. The curved track component 1400 includes a substantially planar floor 1402, an outer side wall 1404a, an inner side wall 1404b, and connectors 1406 on each end. Generally, the curved track component 1400 includes features similar to those shown and described for the straight track component 1300. For example, the curved track component 1400 can include any one or more features described above for the straight track component 1300. In some implementations, the curved track component 1400 may include an upward curvature 1320 on only one side (e.g., adjacent to outer side wall 1404a) of the curved track component 1400, although such a feature is also possible on the straight track component 1300.

FIG. 15 shows a multi-component playset 1500. The playset 1500 includes multiple communal area components 1200, straight track components 1300, and curved track components 1400. As depicted, the floors 1202, 1302, and 1402 of the various components generally meet in substantially the same plane when the components are connected together using the connectors 1206, 1306, and 1406. Generally, the relative dimensions of the components are selected to facilitate interconnection of components in multiple

configurations (e.g., such that the components tend to meet at connectors rather than needing different lengths or different curvatures to make components properly match up at the connectors). Moreover, the gates 1210 of the communal area component 1200 can be used to control flow or movement of vibration powered devices through the playset 1500. In some
5 implementations, any of the components (e.g., straight track components 1300 or curved track components 1400) can also or alternatively include gates or other flow control features (e.g., one-way gates that swing in one direction but not the other to allow passage of devices in only one direction). The playset 1500 or portions thereof can be part of a kit (e.g., sold together) for use in constructing playsets of arbitrary size and configuration.

10 FIG. 16 is a flow diagram of a process 1600 for using a playset for autonomous devices. The process 1600 includes connecting at least one track component (e.g., straight track component 1300 or curved track component 1400) to a communal area component (e.g., communal area component 1200) at 1605. Varying numbers of components can be connected together to form playsets with many different configurations. The various
15 components can include any one or more of the component features described above. At least one gate on one of the components (e.g., communal area component 1200) is manually opened or closed (e.g., by a user) at 1610. Finally, at least one self-propelled vibration-driven device is operated in at least one of the communal area component or the track component at 1615.

20 Thus, particular embodiments of the subject matter have been described. Other embodiments are within the scope of the following claims.

CLAIMS

1. A playset for autonomous devices, the playset comprising:
a communal area including a substantially horizontal and substantially planar area
bounded by a plurality of side walls;
5 a plurality of connectors; and
a plurality of ports, with each port disposed in a side wall, wherein each port includes
a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the autonomous devices when
closed, and to allow passage of the autonomous devices when open, and each port is situated
adjacent to one of the connectors.
- 10 2. The playset of claim 1 wherein each autonomous device includes a vibration-powered
drive.
3. The playset of claim 1 further comprising at least one track adapted for traversal by
the autonomous devices, wherein each track is adapted to connect to the communal area at
one of the ports using one of the connectors.
- 15 4. The playset of claim 3 wherein each track includes a channel having vertical lateral
sides, open ends, and a floor, wherein the vertical lateral sides are spaced at a substantially
consistent distance between the open ends.
5. The playset of claim 4 wherein the floor includes a substantially planar surface and an
upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets the vertical lateral sides.
- 20 6. The playset of claim 5 wherein the upward curvature is adapted to cause each
autonomous device to tend to turn toward a centerline of the channel when the autonomous
device moves toward the lateral side of the channel.
7. The playset of claim 4 wherein each track is adapted to connect to the communal area
using one of the connectors on the communal area and a corresponding connector at one end
25 of the channel such that the end of the channel substantially aligns horizontally with one of
the ports and the floor of the channel substantially aligns vertically with the substantially
planar area of the communal area.
8. The playset of claim 7 wherein each track includes a connector at each end of the
channel and each of the connectors adjacent to a port of the communal area is adapted to
30 interlock with each connector at each end of the channel.
9. The playset of claim 1 wherein the side walls are substantially straight along a
horizontal dimension.
10. The playset of claim 9 wherein the side walls of the communal area form a
substantially regular polygon.

11. The playset of claim 10 wherein the substantially regular polygon includes at least five sides.

12. The playset of claim 11 wherein the substantially regular polygon includes six sides.

13. The playset of claim 10 wherein the communal area includes a substantially planar open space and each side wall has a horizontal dimension that is at least three times a horizontal dimension of each of the plurality of ports.

14. The playset of claim 1 wherein each gate includes a lever and is pivotally attached to a portion of one of the side walls of the communal area, wherein each gate is adapted to be opened and closed by rotating the lever in an arc substantially perpendicular to the substantially planar area of the communal area.

15. A playset kit comprising:

at least one communal section including:

a communal area bounded by a plurality of vertical side walls;

a plurality of connectors; and

a plurality of ports, with each port disposed in a side wall along one of the side walls of the communal area and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors; and

at least one track adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices, wherein each track is adapted to connect to the communal area at one of the ports using one of the connectors and each track includes a channel having vertical lateral sides, open ends, and a floor, wherein the vertical lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between the open ends, and the floor includes a substantially planar surface and an upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets the vertical lateral sides.

16. The playset kit of claim 15 wherein each port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the vibration-powered devices when closed, and to allow passage of the vibration-powered devices when open, and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors.

17. The playset kit of claim 15 wherein each track includes a connector at each end of the channel and each of the connectors adjacent to a port of the communal area is adapted to interlock with the connectors at the ends of the channel.

18. The playset kit of claim 15 further comprising at least one vibration-powered device including:

a body;

a rotational motor coupled to the body;

an eccentric load, wherein the rotational motor is adapted to rotate the eccentric load;

and

a plurality of legs each having a leg base and a leg tip at a distal end relative to the leg base, wherein at least a portion of the plurality of legs are:

constructed from a flexible material;

5 injection molded;

integrally coupled to the body at the leg base; and

include at least one driving leg configured to cause the vibration-powered device to move in a direction generally defined by an offset between the leg base and the leg tip as the rotational motor rotates the eccentric load.

10 19. A playset kit comprising:

at least one communal section including:

a communal area bounded by a plurality of vertical side walls;

a plurality of connectors; and

15 a plurality of ports, with each port disposed in a side wall of the communal area and each port is situated adjacent to one of the connectors, wherein each port includes a gate adapted to open and close, to impede movement of the vibration-powered devices when closed, and to allow passage of the vibration-powered devices when open; and

at least one track adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices, wherein each track is adapted to connect to the communal area at one of the ports using one of the
20 connectors and each track includes a channel having lateral sides adapted to limit movement of the vibration-powered devices laterally with respect to a longitudinal dimension of the channel, open ends, and a floor.

20. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the lateral sides are spaced at a substantially consistent distance between the open ends.

25 21. The playset kit of claim 19 wherein the at least one track adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices includes a plurality of tracks adapted for traversal by vibration-powered devices, including at least one straight track and at least one curved track.

22. The playset kit of claim 19 wherein each channel includes an upward curvature in a vicinity of at least one lateral side and the upward curvature is adapted to cause a vibration-
30 powered device to tend to turn toward a centerline of the channel when the vibration-powered device moves forward at an angle relative to the lateral side of the channel.

23. The playset kit of claim 19 further comprising at least one vibration-powered device including:

a body;

a rotational motor coupled to the body;
an eccentric load, wherein the rotational motor is adapted to rotate the eccentric load;
and

a plurality of legs each having a leg base and a leg tip at a distal end relative to the leg
5 base, wherein at least a portion of the plurality of legs are:
constructed from a flexible material;
injection molded;
integrally coupled to the body at the leg base; and
include at least one driving leg configured to cause the vibration-powered
10 device to move in a direction generally defined by an offset between the leg base and the leg
tip as the rotational motor rotates the eccentric load.

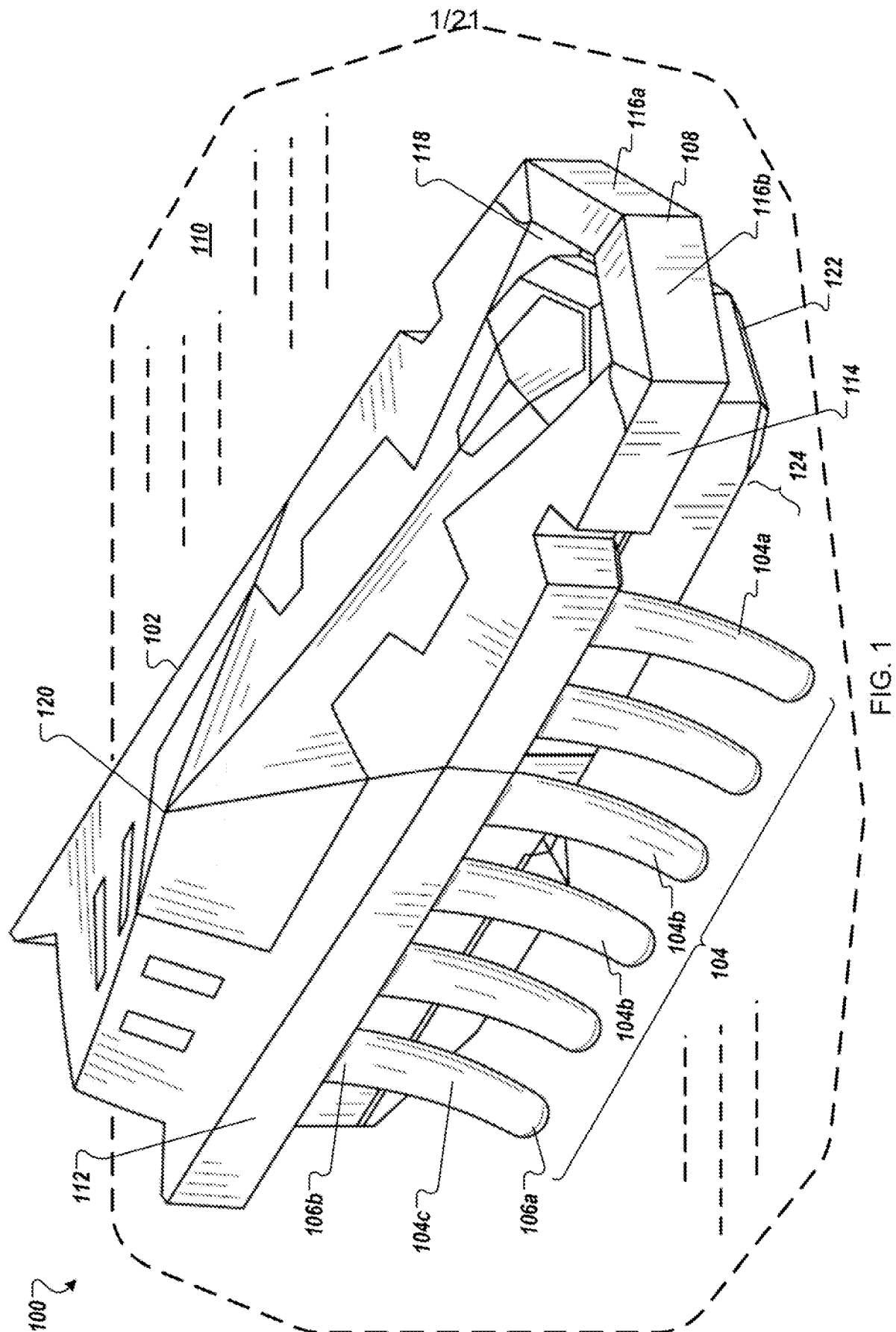
24. A playset component comprising:
a substantially planar floor disposed between longitudinal ends;
a connector at each longitudinal end, wherein the connector is adapted to interlock
15 with a corresponding connector on another playset component;
lateral sides adapted to limit movement of vibration-powered devices laterally with
respect to a longitudinal dimension of the floor, wherein the lateral sides terminate at each
longitudinal end to form an open end; and
wherein the floor includes an upward curvature in a vicinity of where the floor meets
20 the lateral sides.

25. The apparatus of claim 24 wherein the lateral sides are spaced at a substantially
consistent distance between the open ends.

26. A method for using a playset, the method comprising:
connecting at least one track component to a communal area component, wherein the
25 communal area component includes a communal area having a substantially horizontal and
substantially planar area bounded by a plurality of side walls, a plurality of connectors, and a
plurality of ports, with each port disposed in a side wall, each port including a gate adapted to
open and close, to impede movement of the autonomous devices when closed, and to allow
passage of the autonomous devices when open, and each port is situated adjacent to one of
30 the connectors, and wherein the at least one track component is adapted for traversal by
vibration-powered devices, each track component adapted to connect to the communal area
component at one of the ports using one of the connectors and each track including a channel
having lateral sides adapted to limit movement of the vibration-powered devices laterally
with respect to a longitudinal dimension of the channel, open ends, and a floor;

repositioning at least one gate on one of the communal area component or one of the track components; and

operating at least one self-propelled, vibration-driven device in at least one of the communal area component or one of the track components.



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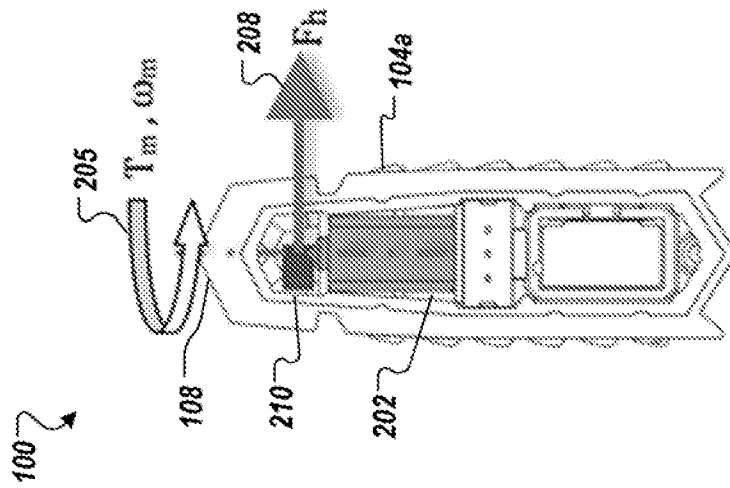


FIG. 2B

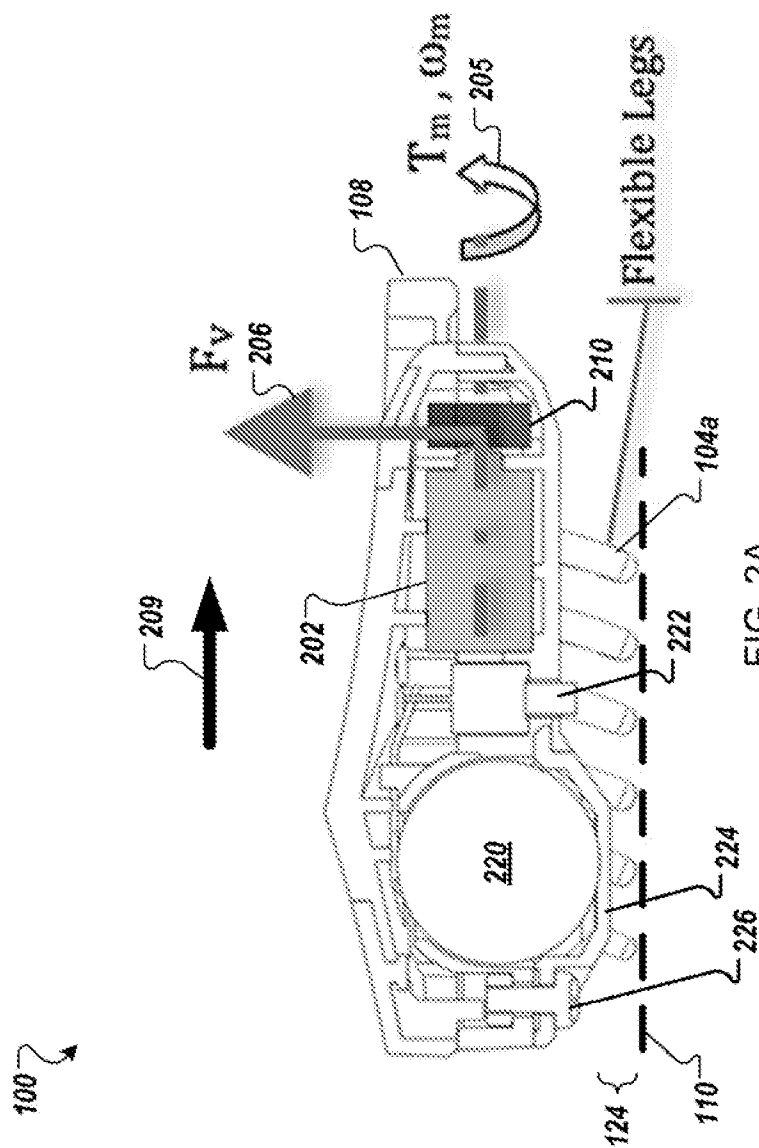


FIG. 2A

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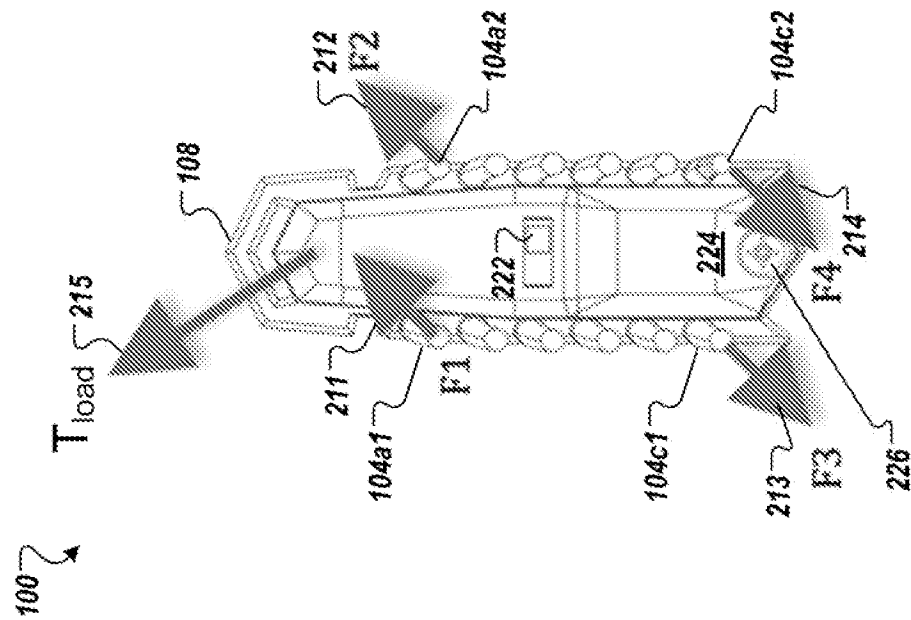


FIG. 2D

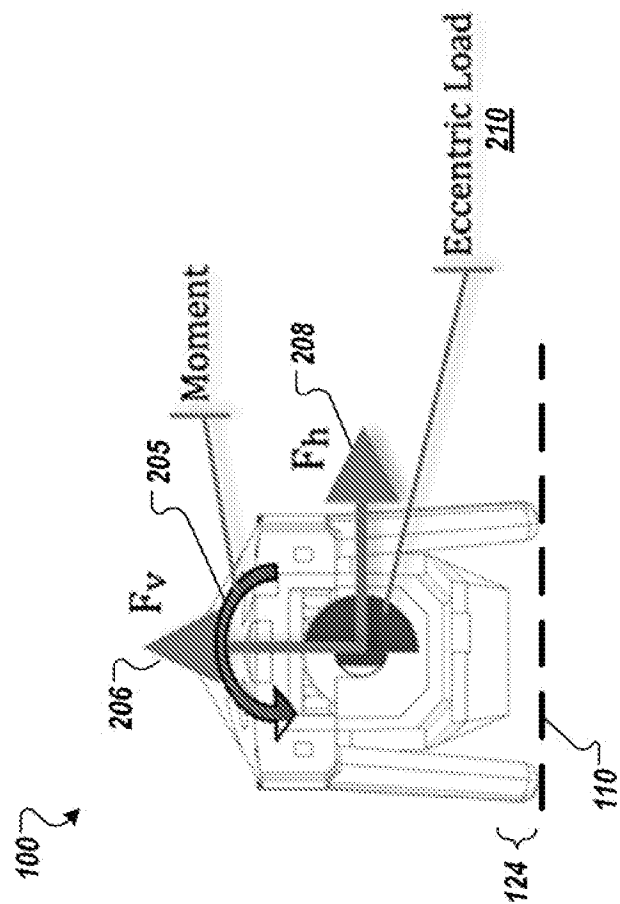


FIG. 2C

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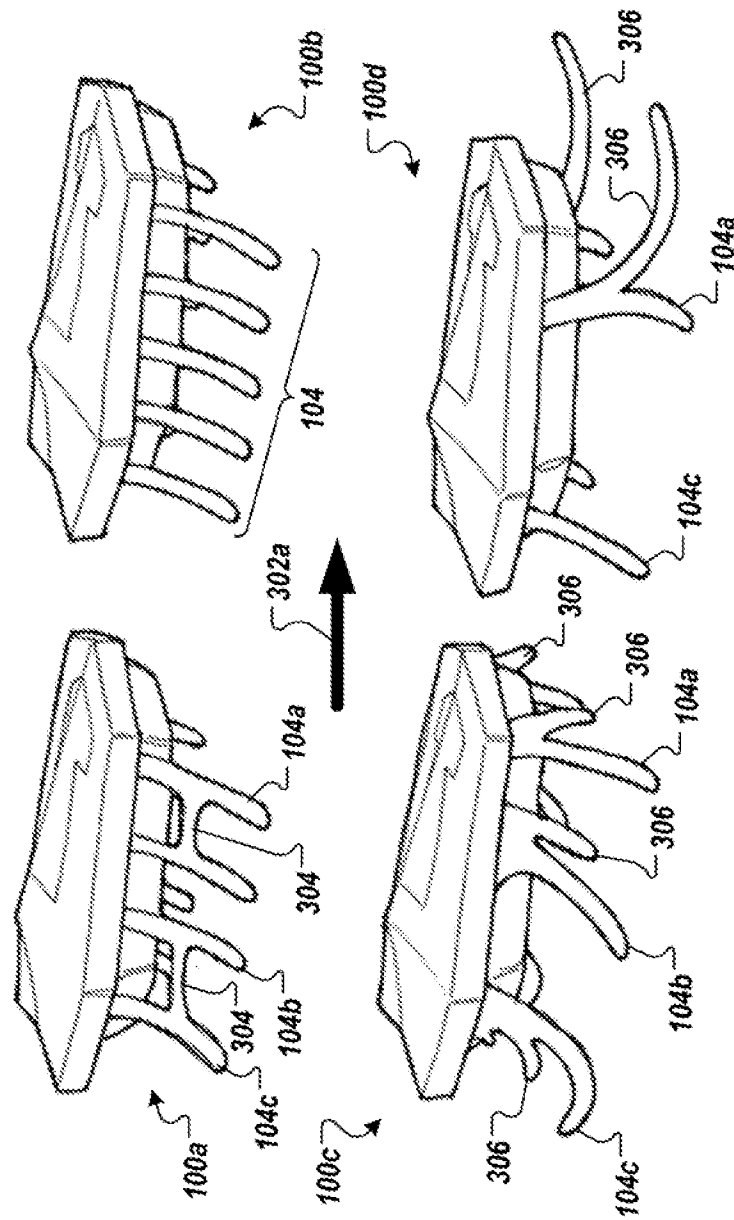


FIG. 3A

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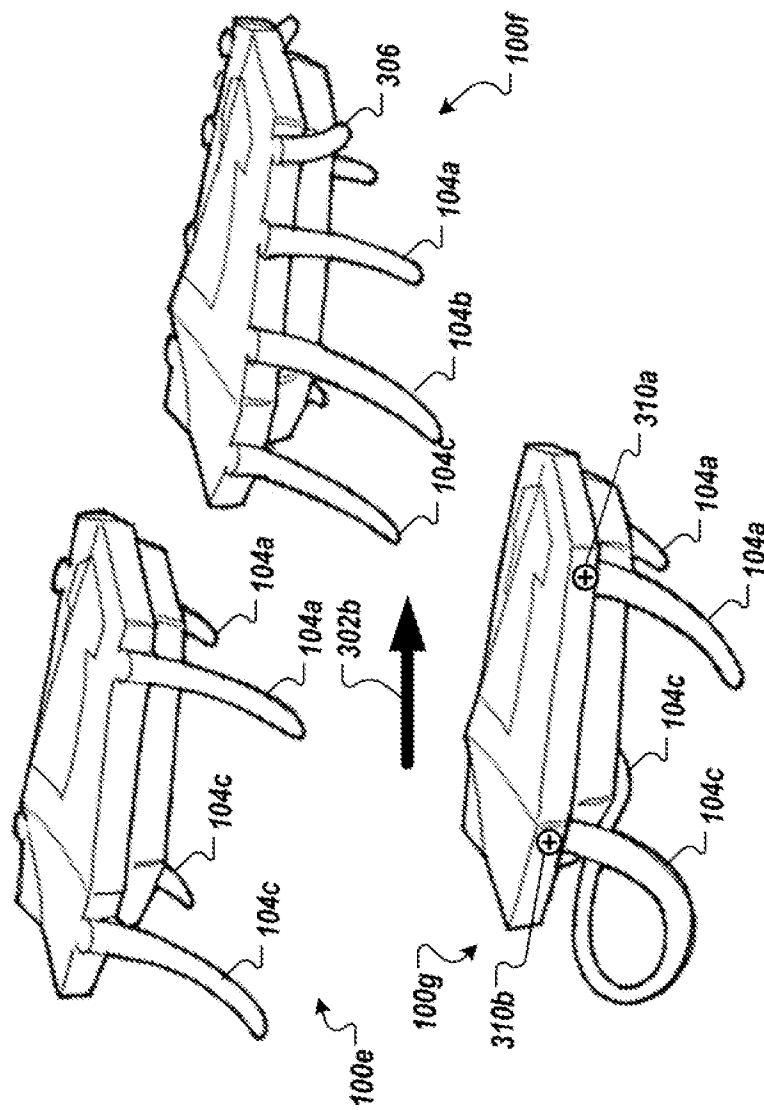


FIG. 3B

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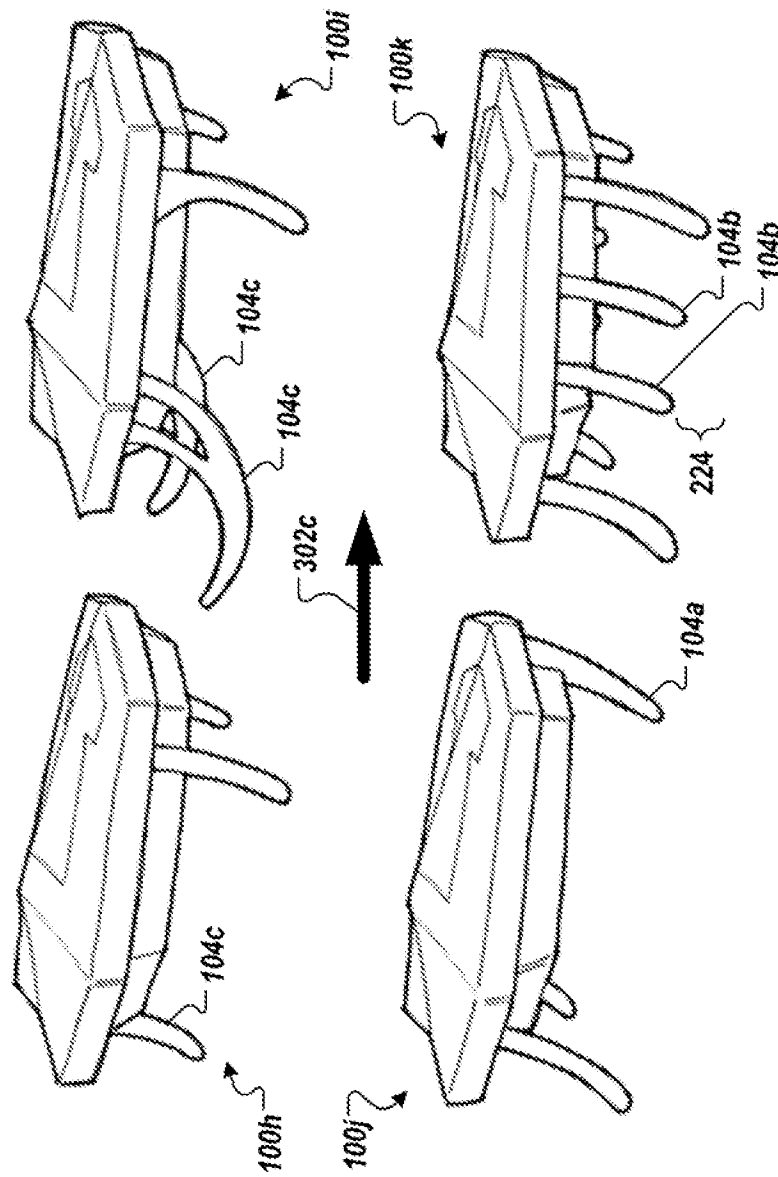
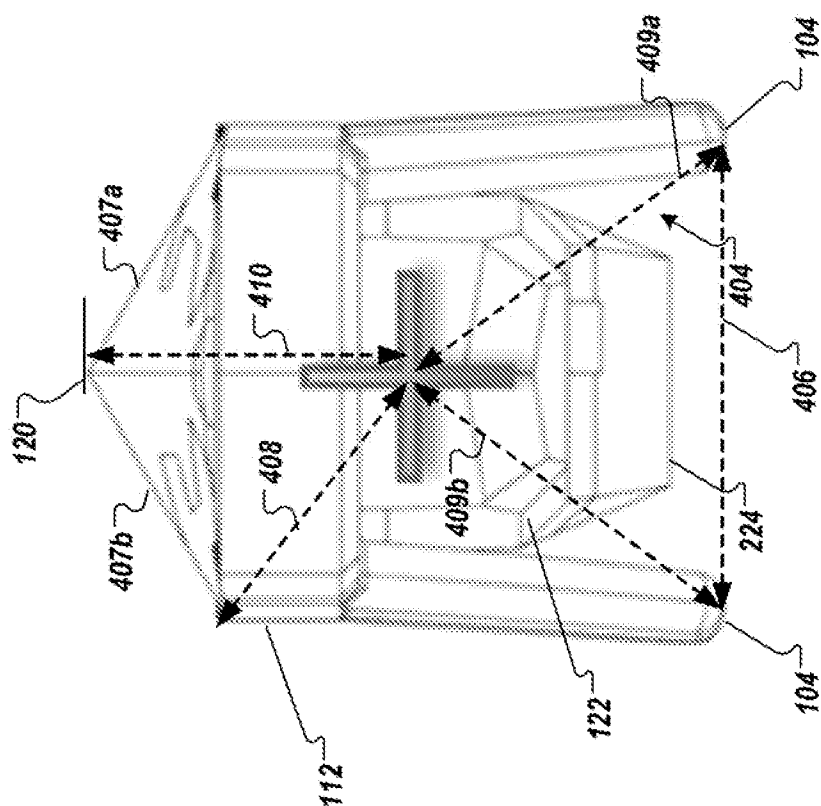


FIG. 3C

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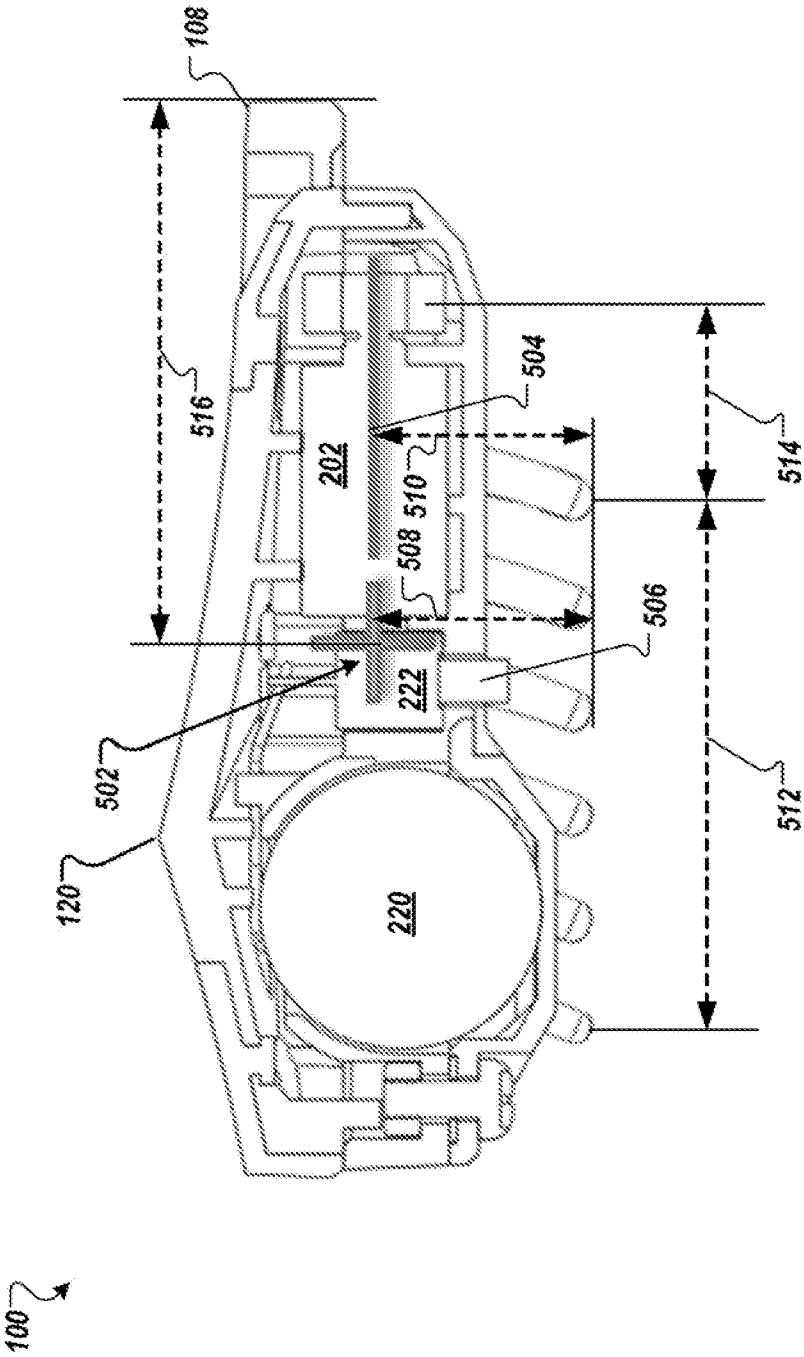


FIG. 5

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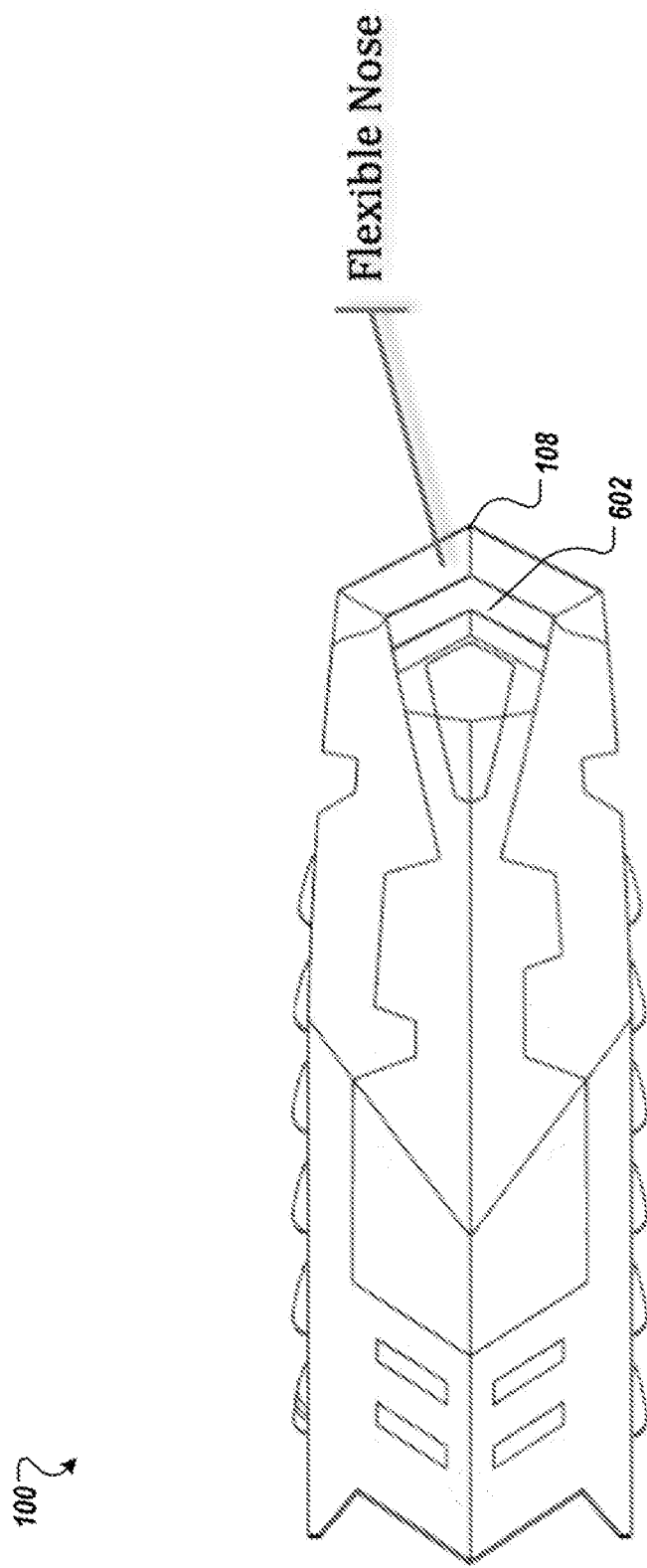


FIG. 6

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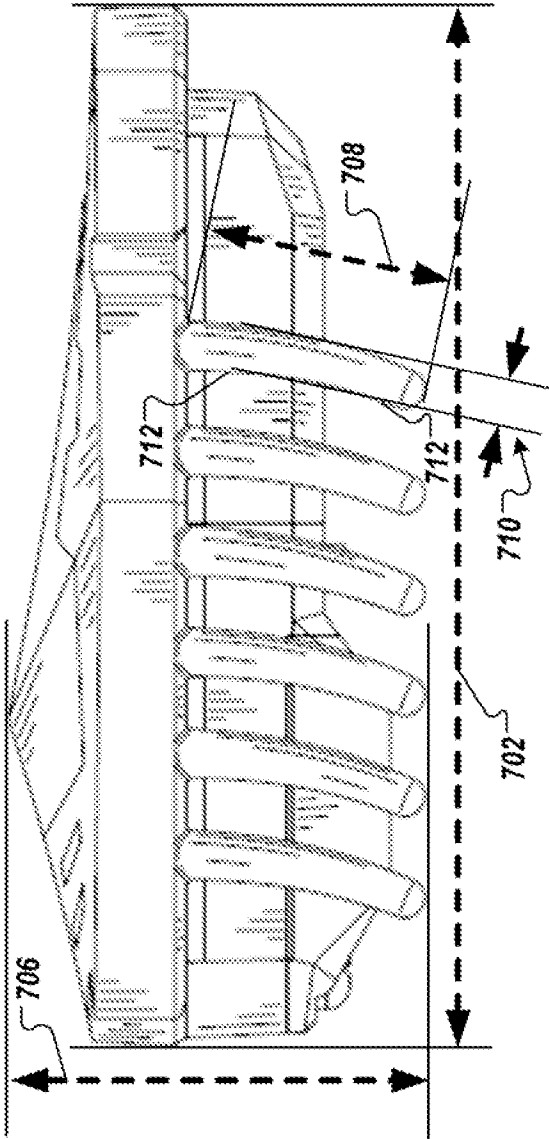


FIG. 7B

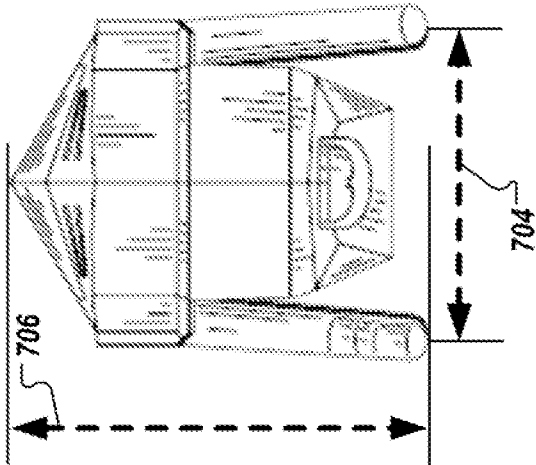


FIG. 7A

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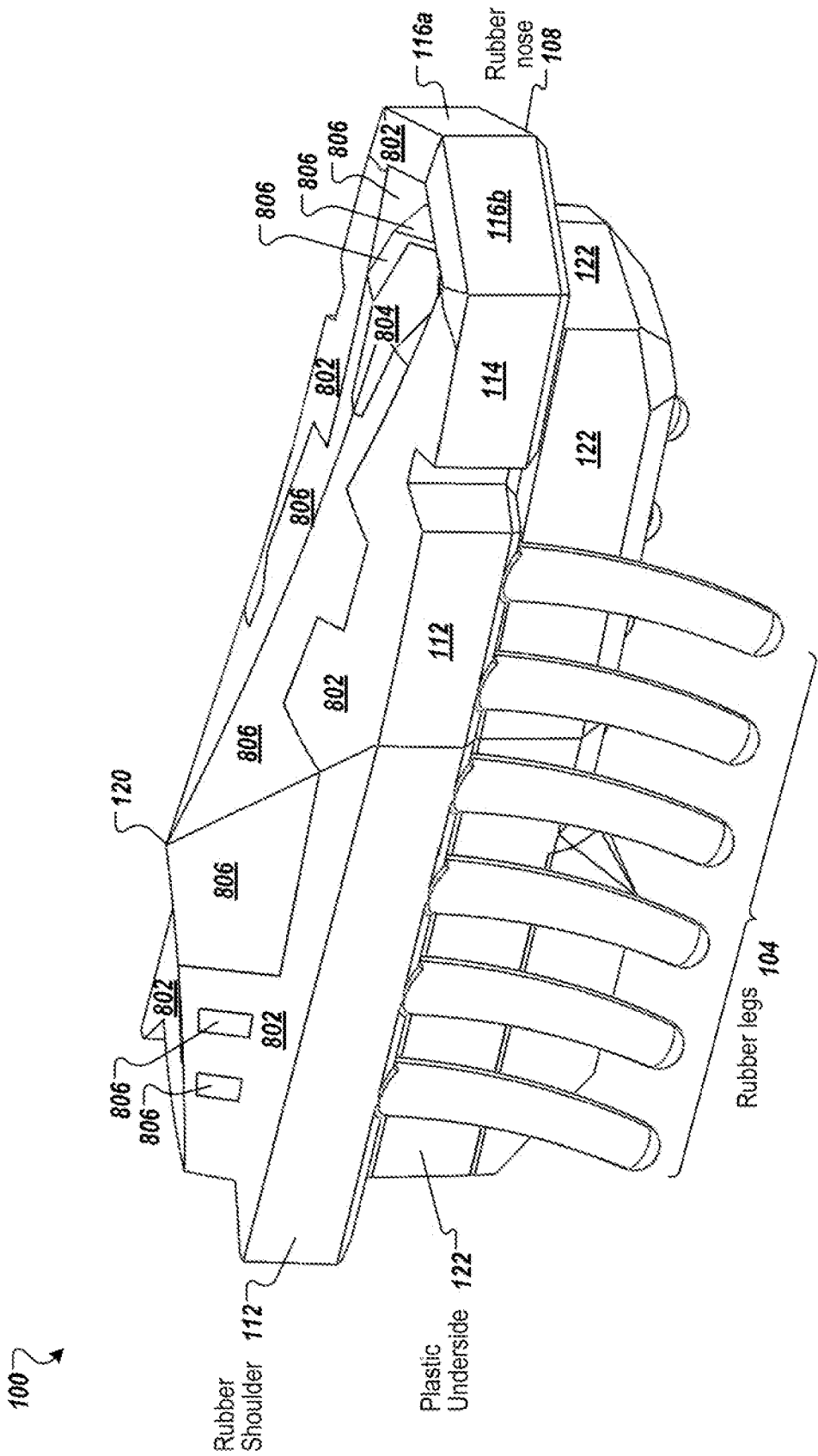


FIG. 8

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100y ↗

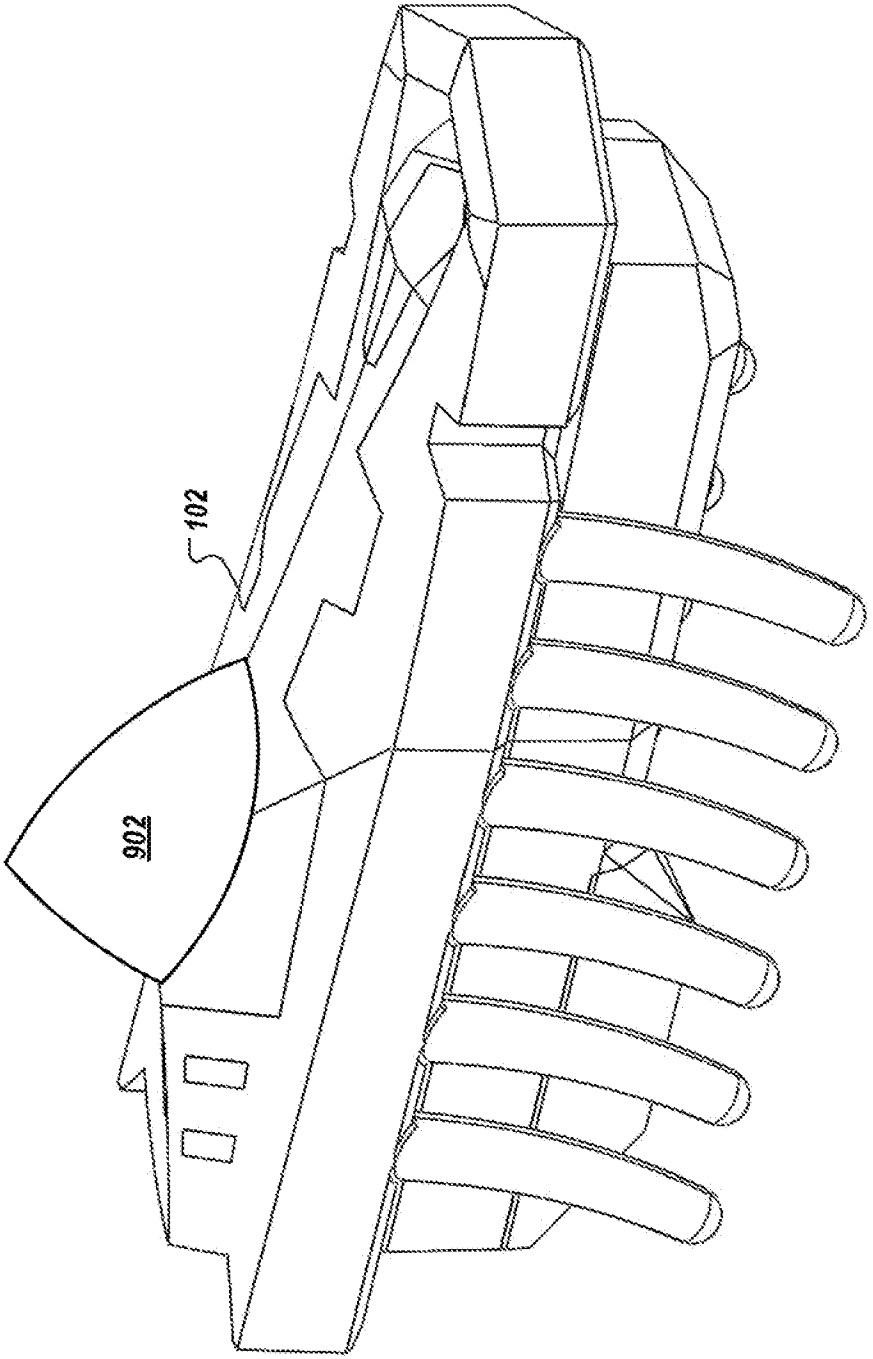


FIG. 9A

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100z

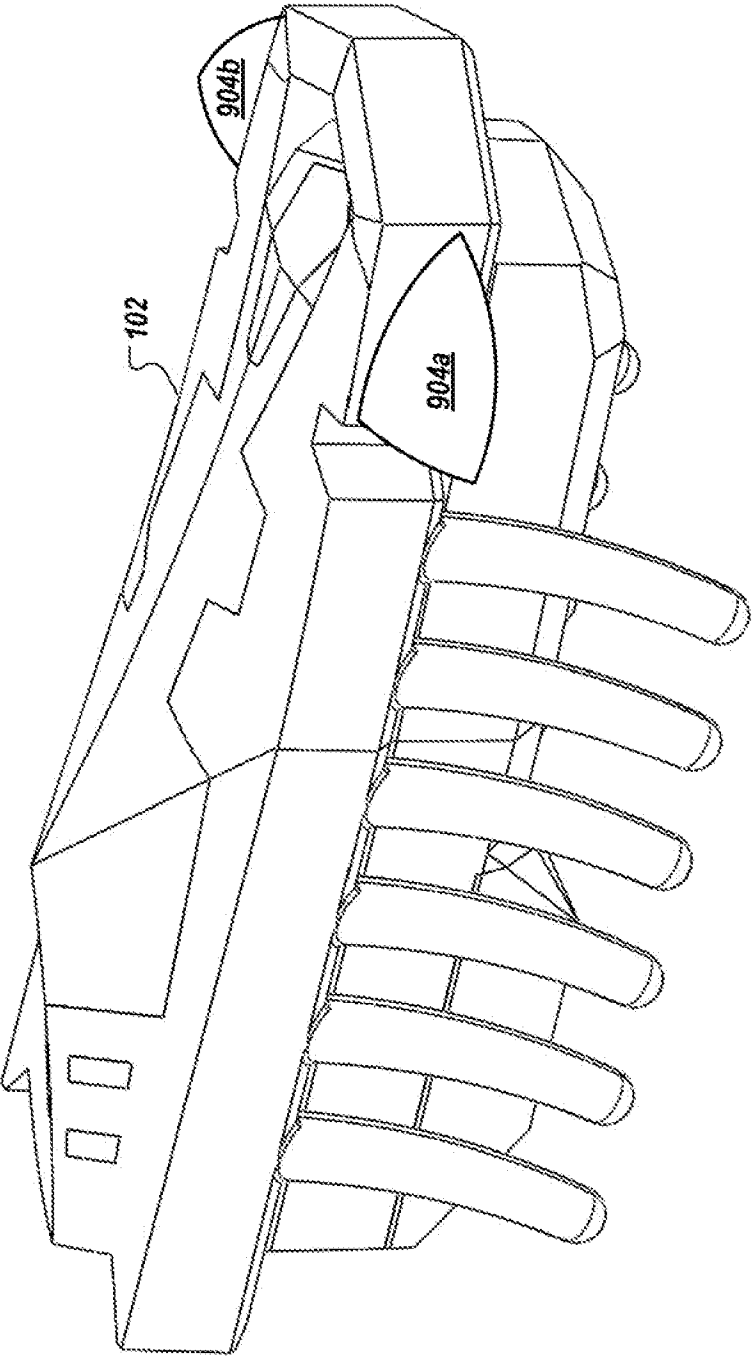


FIG. 9B

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1100

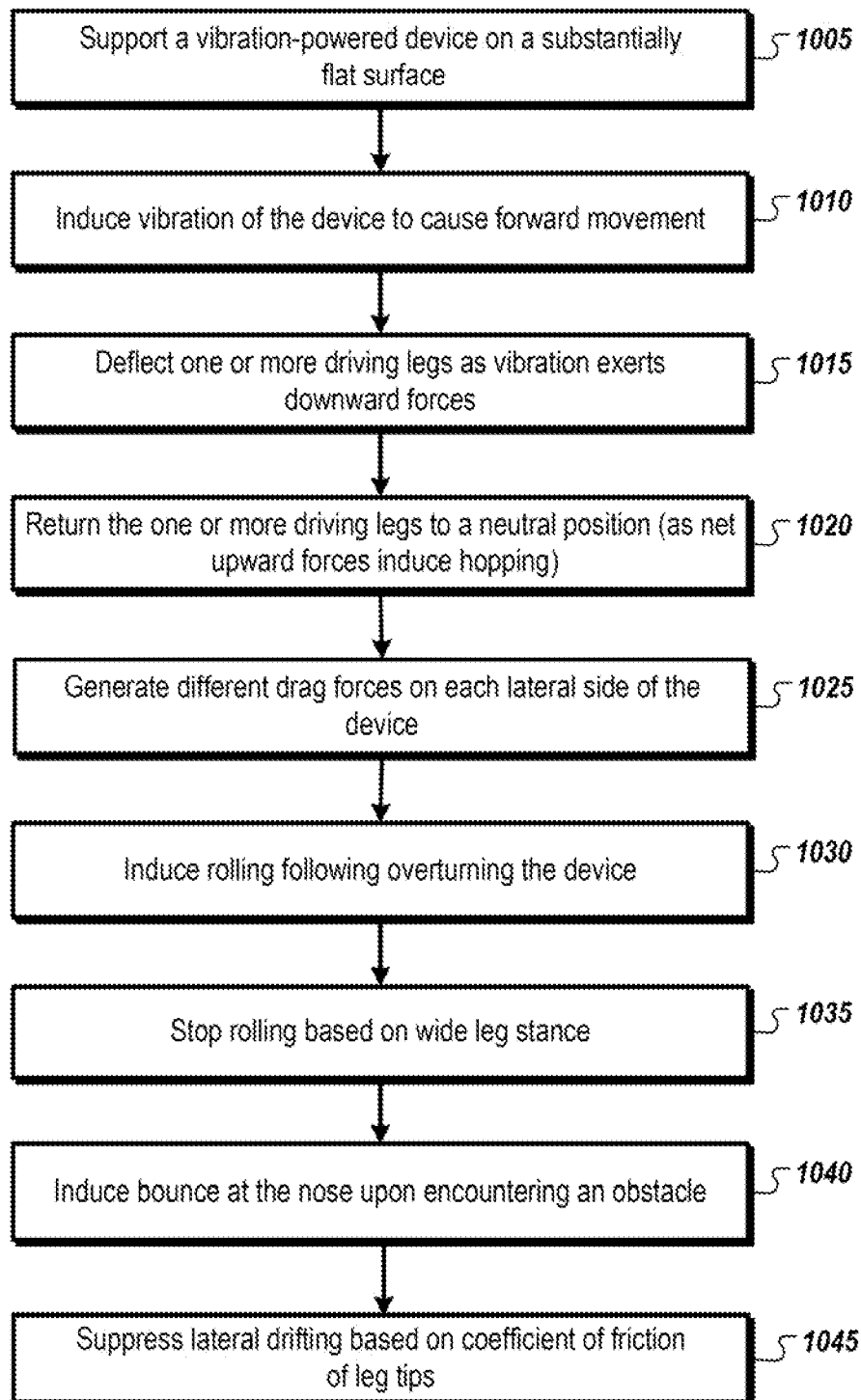


FIG. 10

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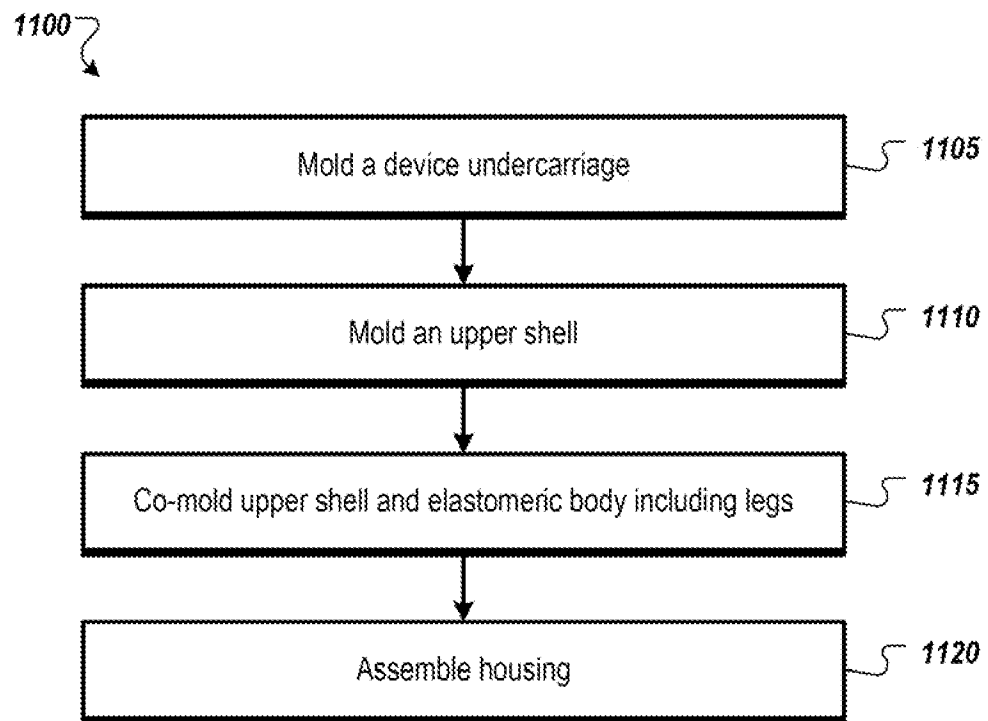


FIG. 11

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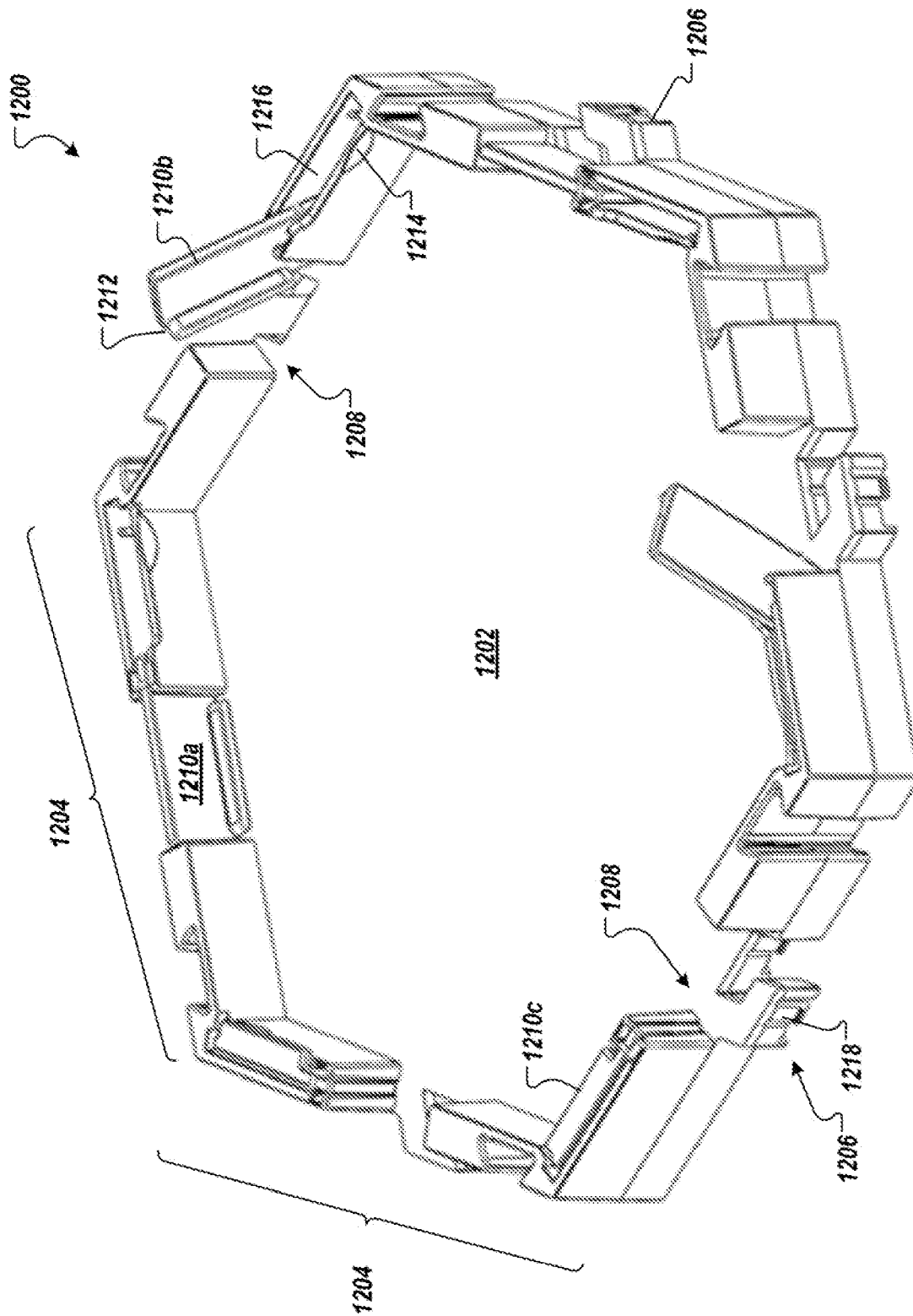


FIG. 12

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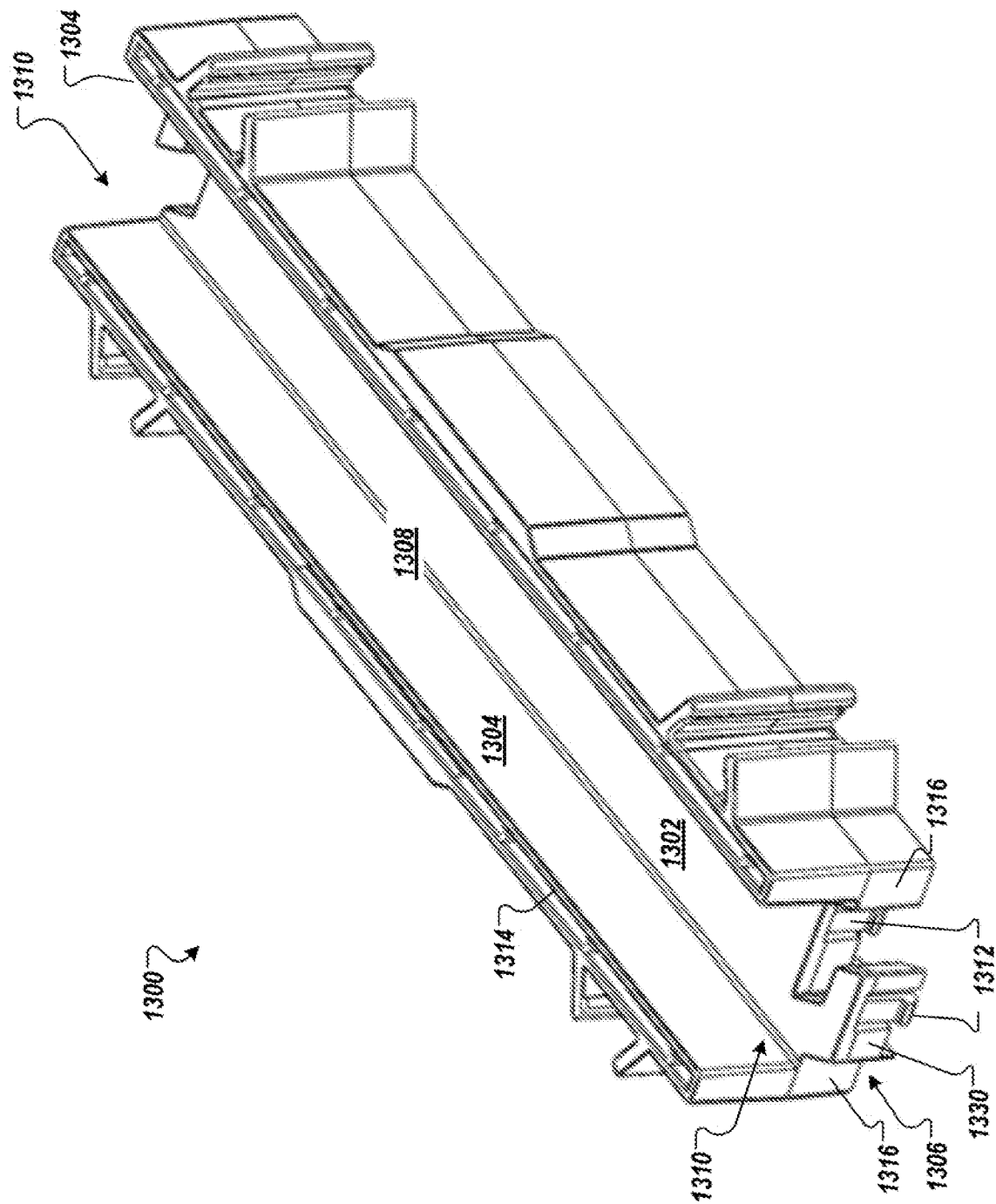


FIG. 13A

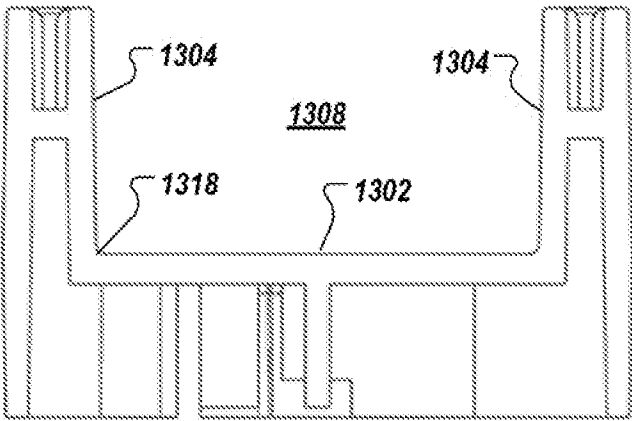


FIG. 13B

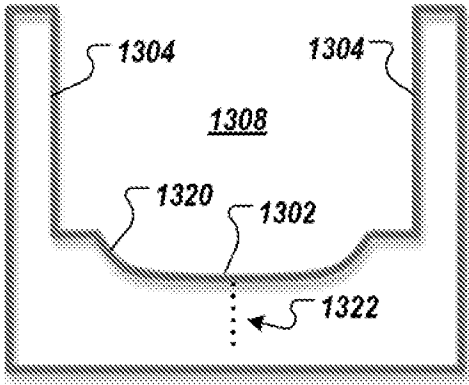


FIG. 13C

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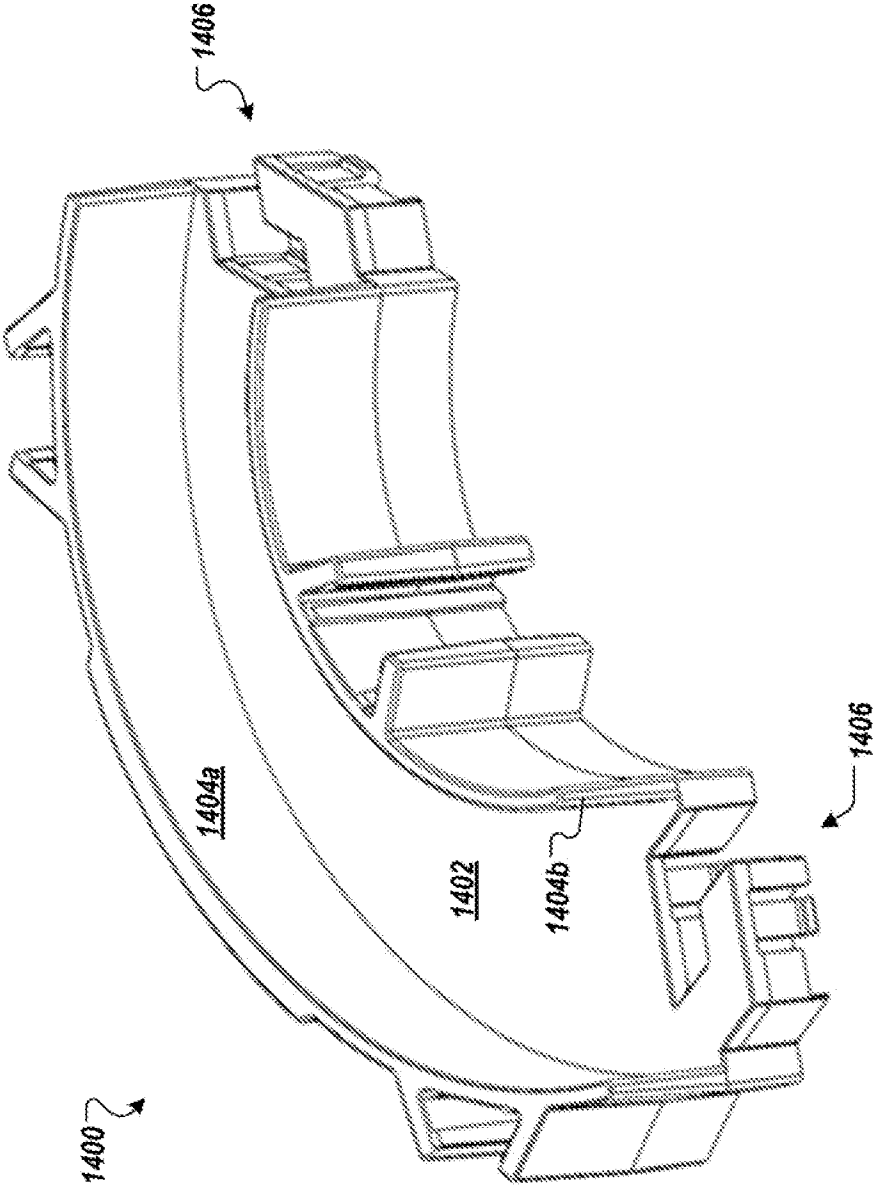


FIG. 14

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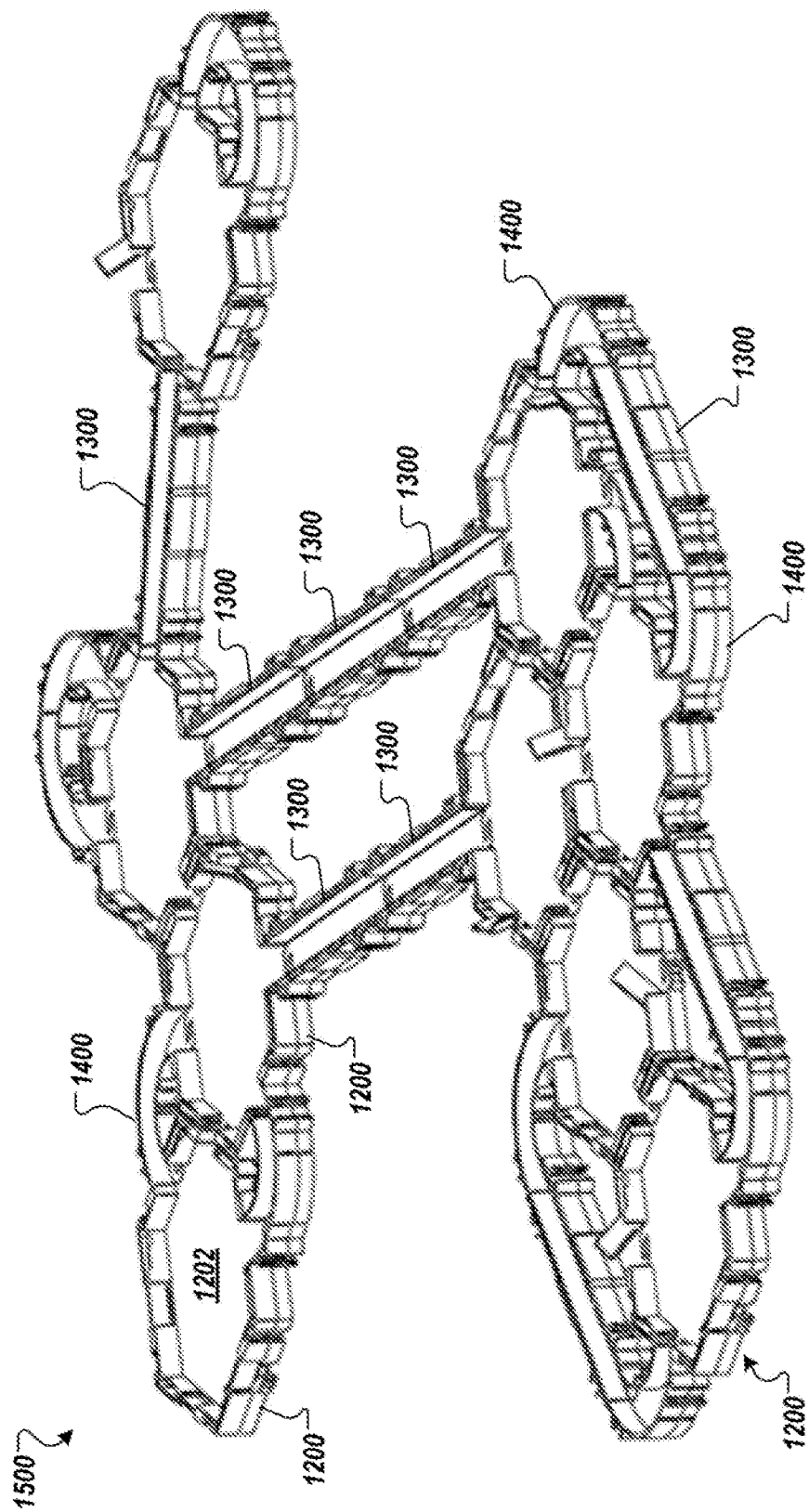


FIG. 15

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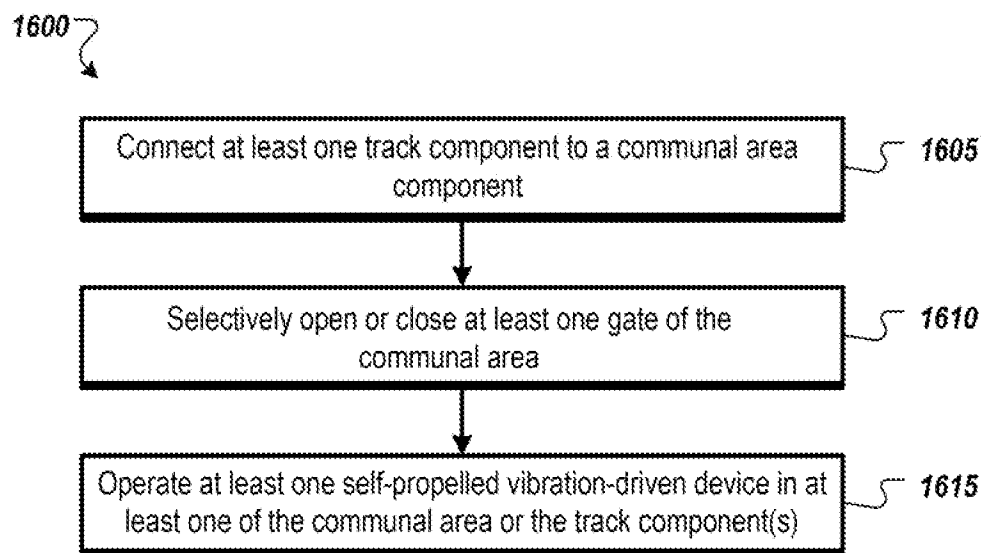


FIG. 16