

INTEGRATED APPARATUS FOR CONDUCTING AND MONITORING CHEMICAL REACTIONS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims the benefit of

- (1) U.S. provisional application No. 60/996,817, filed December 6, 2007;
 - (2) U.S. provisional application No. 61/064,871, filed March 31, 2008; and
 - (3) PCT application No. PCT/SG2008/000222, filed June 23, 2008,
- the entire contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to an apparatus and method for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions, particularly nucleic acid amplification reactions.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] An integrated system for real-time polymerase chain reactions (PCR) is available from Cepheid under the brand name GeneXpert™. This system can automate sample preparation and perform steps for DNA extraction in a special cartridge that is coupled to the system. The cartridge includes a thin, diamond-shaped reaction vessel. The side walls of the reaction vessel provide optical windows for optically interrogating the content contained in the reaction vessel. The system includes optical excitation and detection assemblies and two opposing heating plates for heating the reaction vessel when the reaction vessel is received between the heating plates. A fan is provided in the system for cooling the heating plates. The system can perform heating and cooling cycles required for real time PCR and detect the presence of multiple target nucleic acids in the same cartridge.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] It has been realized that conventional systems for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions can be improved and simplified. For example, the construction of the base system can be simplified. Further, it has been realized that an integrated apparatus may be provided wherein sample preparation, pre-treatment, reaction and detection can all be performed *in situ*. It is also desirable to provide an apparatus for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions with improved performance, relatively simple structure, relatively lower cost, or a combination of these features. In accordance with an aspect of the present invention, an apparatus for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions is provided. The apparatus comprises a base; a thermal cycler mounted on the base; a plurality of heat-conducting receptacles mounted on the thermal cycler and in heat-communication therewith, each one of the receptacles comprising an opaque body defining a bore having an open end, a first window, and a second window; a cartridge removably mounted on the receptacles, the cartridge comprising a plurality of light-transmitting reaction vessels, and comprising conduits connected to the reaction vessels for processing and transferring a fluid, the reaction vessels respectively received in the bores of the receptacles through the open ends of the bores; a light emitter mounted on the base for illuminating the reaction vessels through the first windows of the reaction vessels; and a light detector mounted on the base for selectively receiving and detecting light emitted from the reaction vessels through the second windows of the receptacles. The light detector may comprise a single photo-multiplier-tube (PMT). The apparatus may comprise a lens mounted on the base for focusing the light emitted from the reaction vessels onto the PMT. The apparatus may comprise a plurality of light emitters each positioned for guiding the light emitted from the light emitter toward a respective one of the first windows. A plurality of light emitters may be provided, each of which is positioned to illuminate a respective one of the reaction vessels. Each reaction vessel may have a generally cylindrical shape. The bores of the receptacles may be generally cylindrical. The first and second windows of each receptacle may be configured to reduce transmission of light received from the second window to the light detector

through the first window. The receptacles may consist of three receptacles. The light emitter may comprise a light emitting diode. The thermal cycler may comprise a cooler and a heater. The cooler may be a thermal electric cooler. The heater may be an electric heater. The cooler and heater may be integrated. The apparatus may comprise a heat sink mounted on the base, and the thermal cycler may be mounted on the heat sink. The apparatus may comprise a controller in communication with the thermal cycler for controlling the thermal cycler. The controller may be in communication with the light detector for receiving a signal in response to detection of light by the light detector. The controller may control the thermal cycler to selectively heat or cool the reaction vessels in response to receiving the signal. The apparatus may comprise a plurality of light filters each positioned between the light emitter and a respective one of the receptacles. The apparatus may comprise a light filter positioned between the receptacles and the light detector. The receptacles may be made of copper or brass. The conduits of the cartridge may comprise conduits configured for preparing and treating a sample to be reacted or detected and for transferring the sample to one or more of the reaction vessels. At least one of the reaction vessels of the cartridge may contain a reaction mixture. The reaction mixture may be a nucleic acid amplification reaction mixture. The reaction mixture may be a polymerase chain reaction mixture.

[0005] In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, there is provided a system comprising the apparatus described the preceding paragraph and a user interface in communication with the apparatus. The apparatus can generate an output, and the user interface can receive the output and displays information based on the output. The output may comprise output reflective of a light signal detected by the detector.

[0006] In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of operating the apparatus described herein. In this method, a plurality of reaction mixtures are prepared in the cartridge and each reaction mixture is placed in a selected reaction vessel. The thermal cycler is controlled to selectively heat or cool the selected reaction vessels and thus the reaction mixtures in the selected reaction vessels. The reaction mixtures in different reaction vessels

are sequentially illuminated with the light emitter(s). Light emitted from the reaction mixtures is detected with the light detector. The thermal cycler may be controlled in response to detection of the light emitted from the reaction mixtures. An output in response to a detection result may be displayed to a user.

[0007] Other aspects and features of the present invention will become apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art upon review of the following description of specific embodiments of the invention in conjunction with the accompanying figures.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] In the figures, which illustrate, by way of example only, embodiments of the present invention,

[0009] **FIG. 1** is a perspective view of an apparatus for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions, exemplary of an embodiment of the present invention;

[0010] **FIG. 2** is a top plan view of the apparatus of **FIG. 1**;

[0011] **FIG. 3** is a side elevation view of the apparatus of **FIG. 1**;

[0012] **FIG. 4** is a cross-sectional view of a receptacle shown in **FIG. 1**;

[0013] **FIG. 5** is a schematic diagram of the optical components and light path in the apparatus of **FIG. 1**;

[0014] **FIG. 6** is a block diagram illustrating a system for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions which includes the apparatus of **FIG. 1**, exemplary of an embodiment of the present invention;

[0015] **FIG. 7** is a line graph showing fluorescence intensity detected using the apparatus of **FIG. 1**. and

[0016] FIG.8 is a rear see-through perspective view of the cartridge shown in FIG. 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0017] An integrated apparatus or system for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions is provided. The chemical reactions may be nucleic acid amplification reactions, including polymerase chain reactions (PCR) such as basic PCR or reverse transcriptase PCR (RT-PCR), or other reactions that require controlled heating/cooling and real time optical detection. For example, real time PCR can be conveniently conducted and monitored using such an apparatus or system.

[0018] FIG. 1 is a perspective, exploded view of an apparatus 100 for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions in a cartridge 200, exemplary of an embodiment of the present invention. Top and side views of apparatus 100, but without cartridge 200, are shown in FIGS. 2 and 3.

[0019] Apparatus 100 includes a base 102. A heat sink 104 is mounted on base 102. A thermal cyclor 106 is mounted on heat sink 104. Heat sink 104 is thermally conducting for efficient heat exchange with thermal cyclor 106. Heat sink 104 may be made of a suitable material and may have a suitable construction for effectively dissipating heat. For example, heat sink 104 may be provided with air-cooling features. Three heat-conducting receptacles 108 are mounted on thermal cyclor 106. Three light emitters 110 are mounted on heat sink 104 adjacent receptacles 108. A support 112 is mounted on base 102 for supporting a light detector 114.

[0020] Detector 114 can be any suitable light detector or sensor for detecting and analyzing a light signal that is expected to be emitted from a reagent or a reaction product during use. For example, detector 114 may include a single photo-multiplier tube (PMT). Detector 114 is positioned and aligned to receive light emitted from different receptacles 108, as will be further described below. As can

be appreciated, with a single detector, cost and complexity of the apparatus may be reduced.

[0021] A light filter **116** and an optical lens **118** may be positioned in the optical path between receptacles **108** and detector **114** to focus and filter the light from receptacles **108**. When used, lens **118** can conveniently focus lights from different receptacles **108** onto the same detector **114** for improved performance.

[0022] As better shown in **FIG. 4**, each receptacle **108** has an opaque body **120**. Body **120** may be formed from any suitable material that is sufficiently heat-conducting. For example, copper, brass, aluminum, or like materials may be used for forming body **120**. Body **120** defines a bore **122** with an open end **124** for receiving a reaction vessel **202** of cartridge **202** (not shown in **FIG. 4** but see **FIG. 1**). Bore **122** may be generally cylindrical. Bore **122** may also have a generally circular cross-section. The bottom end of bore **122** may be closed and may have a rounded or flat shape, or another shape.

[0023] On the side of receptacle **108** that is facing a corresponding light emitter **110**, a first window **126** is provided for allowing light emitted from light emitter **110** to enter bore **122**, and thus the reaction vessel **202** received in bore **112**. On the side of receptacle **108** that is facing detector **114** (or lens **118** when it is provided), a second window **128** is provided for allowing detector **114** to receive and detect light emitted from the reaction vessel **202** received in bore **122**. Windows **126** and **128** may have any shape. For example, they may be generally circular or rectangular.

[0024] As depicted, bodies **120** may be separately formed and may each have a generally tubular shape. In other embodiments, bodies **120** of different receptacles **108** may be integrated into a unitary unit. For example, more than one receptacles may be formed in a unitary block with multiple bores.

[0025] In some embodiments, it may be desirable to reduce or prevent transmission of the incident excitation light received through window **126** (from light emitter **110**) toward detector **114** through window **128**. For example, as depicted in

FIG. 4, the light emitter **110**, windows **126**, **128**, and detector **114** may be configured so that the excitation light is directed at a downward angle, such as about 45 degrees, into window **126**, while emission light received by detector **114** from window **128** travels in a generally horizontal direction. Such an arrangement can reduce light interference and the signal to noise ratio in the detected light.

[0026] As depicted in **FIGS. 1 to 3 and 8**, in the depicted embodiment three elongated receptacles **108** are positioned adjacent one another and are arranged in a generally parallel relationship. Each receptacle **108** extends upwardly with its opening end facing up. This arrangement may be convenient in some applications. For example, two or more generally parallel reaction vessels **202** may be provided in a corresponding cartridge, such as cartridge **200** shown in **FIG. 1**, so that multiple reaction vessels **202** can be conveniently simultaneously inserted into bores **122** of receptacles **108**. Reactions in multiple reaction vessels **202** can be conveniently conducted and monitored simultaneously under substantially similar conditions.

[0027] During use, cartridge **200** is removably mounted on receptacles **108** (see **FIG. 8**). As depicted in **FIGS. 1 and 8**, cartridge **200** has several, e.g. three, light-transmitting reaction vessels **202** (only two are visible in **FIG. 1**) and conduits **204** connected to reaction vessels **202** for processing reaction fluids and transferring fluids to and from reaction vessels **202**.

[0028] As depicted, in the present embodiment cartridge **200** has three reaction vessels **202**, which are respectively received in the three bores **122** of receptacles **108** through open ends **124**. In other embodiments, more or fewer reaction vessels may be provided in a cartridge and it is not necessary that all of the reaction vessels are received in receptacles **108**. It is also not necessary that each receptacle **108** receives one reaction vessel when the cartridge is mounted.

[0029] In some embodiments, cartridge **200** may be configured to provide integrated *in situ* sample treatment and processing. For this purpose, cartridge **200** may include various fluid chambers, connecting channels, and built-in fluidic devices for performing the processing tasks desired in a particular application.

[0030] In one embodiment, cartridge **200** may be configured to utilize pneumatic pressure for transferring a fluid between the different processing chambers in cartridge conduits **204**.

[0031] For example, in an embodiment, the conduits of the cartridge (not shown) may include a plurality of pneumatic ports. Each port may be sealed with a seal and shaped to couple to a pneumatic conduit through the seal. The conduits may also include a plurality of chambers, each for receiving a liquid and having a first top opening and a first bottom opening. Each top opening is in fluid communication with a respective one of the pneumatic ports. The bottom openings are in fluid communication with one another through a connecting conduit provided above the bottom openings of the chambers. Therefore, selective application of pneumatic pressures to the chambers through the pneumatic conduits can transfer a liquid from one chamber to another chamber through the connecting conduit. The conduits of the cartridge may be constructed according to the disclosure of PCT application No. PCT/SG2008/000222, with modifications in view of the description herein.

[0032] Cartridge **200** may include any other desired fluidic transfer and flow control features.

[0033] Conveniently, cartridge **200** may be configured to process tissue samples, such as being provided with a tissue dissociation device for tissue sample preparation. Thus, tissue preparation, processing and PCR can be performed in the same cartridge while the cartridge is mounted on apparatus **100**. The cartridge may also be pre-loaded with different agents such as a freeze-dried agent. The cartridge may be designed to withstand a wide temperature range, such as from about 4 °C to about 100 °C, or to a higher temperature that is desired for conducting the particular chemical reaction or for performing a processing step.

[0034] The walls of reaction vessels **202** and the body of cartridge **200** around reaction vessels **202** may be made of a light-transmitting material so that light can be transmitted through the walls to and from the reaction solutions contained therein. A light-transmitting material may be transparent or translucent.

[0035] A light-transmitting reaction vessel **202** may be partially transparent or translucent. For example, windows may be provided for transmitting light therethrough. As can be understood, when windows are provided in reaction vessels **202**, the windows should be positioned to match the locations of windows **126** and **128** in receptacles **108** respectively when cartridge **200** is mounted on receptacles **108**.

[0036] In stead of providing a light-transmitting body around reaction vessels **202**, cartridge **200** may be configured so that the space around reaction vessels **202** is clear of any light-blocking wall to allow the desired light transmission.

[0037] The walls of reaction vessels **202** should also be sufficiently heat-conducting so that the temperature of the reaction mixture contained in the reaction vessel is sufficiently responsive to the temperature change in receptacles **108**.

[0038] Conveniently, three receptacles **108** are sufficient to simultaneously measure reactions in a vessel that contains a sample solution, a vessel that contains a positive control solution, and a vessel that contains a negative control solution. However, in a different embodiment, the number of receptacles **108** may be increased or decreased depending on the particular application and other considerations such as cost and flexibility.

[0039] Thermal cycler **106** is used to alternatively heat or cool receptacles **108**, which in turn heat or cool the reaction vessels received in the bores **122** of receptacles **108** and the reaction mixtures or solutions contained therein. In some embodiments, thermal cycler **106** may include a separate heater (not separately shown) and a separate cooler (not separately shown). The heater may be any suitable heater. For example, an electric heater may be used. The cooler may be any suitable cooler. For example, a fan may be used as a cooler. In some embodiments, the heater and cooler may be integrated in thermal cycler **106**. For example, a thermal electric cooler/heater, or Peltier heat pump, may be used in thermal cycler **106**.

[0040] It should be understood that in different embodiments, it is not necessary that the spatial relationships between heat sink **104**, thermal cycler **106** and receptacles **108** are as shown in the figures. It is sufficient that they are in a heat-exchange relationship or in good thermal contact with one another so that the temperature of receptacles **108** can be controlled by thermal cycler **106**. It may be advantageous in some embodiments that heat sink **104**, thermal cycler **106** and receptacles **108** are arranged to effectively and efficiently cycle the temperature of receptacles **108** through a selected temperature range with the desired cycling rate. In this regard, the arrangement depicted in **FIG. 1** (and **FIG. 3**) may provide effective and efficient heat exchange between receptacles **108** and thermal cycler **106**, for example when a thermal electric cooler/heater is used.

[0041] Each light emitter **110** may include a light source and a light guide (not separately shown) and may be configured and positioned to transmit and guide the emitted excitation light toward one of receptacles **108**.

[0042] A light source may be separately provided or may be integrated with a light emitter **110**. One or more light sources may be used light emitters **110** depending on the particular application. For example, different light sources may be used to emit lights that are of different spectra. Each light emitter **110** may include a light emitting diode (LED) as the light source. For different applications, the light sources may be adjusted, or substituted to provide different light intensity or spectrum or both. In some embodiments, each light emitter **110** may include a light filter (not separately shown in **FIGS. 1 to 3** but see **FIG. 5**) positioned between the corresponding light source and receptacle **108** for filtering the light emitted from the light emitter in order to achieve a desired light spectrum, such as by blocking or absorbing light of undesired frequencies. For example, certain light frequencies may be filtered out to reduce interference with the emission light to be detected by detector **114**.

[0043] **FIG. 5** schematically illustrates the inter-relationship of the optical components in an exemplary embodiment of present invention. In this embodiment, LEDs are used as light emitters. Excitation light emitted from the light

emitters is transmitted to the samples through excitation filters. Light emitted by the samples are transmitted to a PMT through a focusing lens 118 and detection filter 116.

[0044] As shown in **FIG. 6**, a controller 130 (not shown in **FIGS. 1 to 3**) may be provided for controlling the operation of apparatus 100. Controller 130 may be integrated with apparatus 100, such as mounted on base 102, or may be provided separately. In one embodiment, controller 130 is in communication with thermal cycler 106 for selectively heating or cooling receptacles 108. Controller 130 may also control the operation of light emitters 110 or their corresponding light emitter(s) to regulate the light received by the reaction vessels in bores 122. Controller 130 may also be in communication with detector 114 for receiving a signal in response to the detected light, and may control thermal cycler 106 to selectively heat or cool receptacles 108 in response to the received signal.

[0045] Controller 130 may be further in communication with a user interface device 132 for receiving user input therefrom and for transmitting an output thereto. For example, the user input may include operation commands or operating parameters. The output may include data or results obtained during the chemical reactions. For instance, the detected light intensities may be displayed on user interface 132. User interface 132 may include any suitable computing interfacing device such as a computer. The computer for the user interface may be a portable computing device, such as a personal digital assistant (PDA) or the like. Controller 130 may have any suitable structure or hardware and software configuration. A controller typically used for controlling chemical reactions such as real time PCR may be used. Controller 130 may also include a general purpose or special purpose micro-controller. Some control functions may be provided either in controller 130 or in another component. For example, certain temperature control functions may be provided in controller 130, or may be provided in thermal cycler 106, or may be provided by an additional separate control unit such as a standalone thermal controller which is in communication with both controller 130 and thermal cycler 106. Some control functions may be provided either by

hardware such as a circuit or by software such as a special or general purpose control program.

[0046] In some embodiments, controller **130** may include a central processing unit (CPU) or a computer that has a CPU. Controller **130** may be connected either by wire or wirelessly to communicate with various components such as thermal cyclers **106** and detector **114**, and other external devices (not shown).

[0047] Other peripherals for a controller or a computer, such as peripherals for input/output, communication, networking, data/signal conversion/transmission, signal amplification/filtering, may also be included, as can be understood by those skilled in the art.

[0048] For simplicity reasons, some components and features of apparatus **100** are not depicted in the **FIGS. 1 to 6**. A person skilled in the art can appreciate and understand that additional components and features may be added in order to perform certain functions. For example, a build-in or external power supply should be provided and connected to supply the power needed for proper operation during use. Various components may be secured together with screws, bolts and nuts, adhesive, or other fasteners. Wires may be used to electrically connect different electrical components. Sensors may be provided for measuring temperatures. Casing may be provided for enclosing a part or the entire apparatus.

[0049] In use, cartridge **200** is mounted on receptacles **108** by inserting reaction vessels **202** into respective bores **122** of receptacles **108**. As can be appreciated, in some embodiments and applications, it is not necessary that each bore **122** receives a reaction vessel **202**. One or more separate reaction vessels (not shown) such as separate test tubes may be inserted into one or more of bores **122**. Further, a bore **122** may receive no reaction vessel in a particular application.

[0050] Each reaction vessel **202** may contain a selected reaction mixture. For example, with three receptacles **108**, three reaction vessels **202** may be used, which may contain a sample solution, a positive control solution and a negative

control solution respectively. The reaction mixtures may include reaction mixtures for a nucleic acid amplification reaction such as PCR. The nucleic acid may be ribonucleic acid (RNA) or deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). For example, a sample mixture may include avian influenza virus RNA.

[0051] Reaction vessels **202** and the solutions contained therein are heated/cooled according to a pre-selected protocol for conducting the desired chemical reaction, such as PCR, by controlling the operation of thermal cycler **106** to selectively heat or cool receptacles **108**. Receptacles **108** in turn heat or cool reaction vessels **202** and the reaction mixtures contained therein, depending on the temperature differences therebetween at any given time. The control of thermal cycler **106** may be provided by controller **130**. The thermal cycling of thermal cycler **106** varies the temperature of receptacles **108**, which due to their good heat-conducting property can effectively transfer heat to, or away from, the reaction vessels depending on the temperature differences therebetween. The desired temperature cycling profile can be readily determined by those skilled in the art.

[0052] For more precise temperature control, one or more temperature sensors such as thermal couples (not shown) may be provided, such as being imbedded in receptacles **108**, for measuring the actual temperatures in receptacles **108**. Temperature sensors may also be placed elsewhere such as in cartridge **200**. The temperature sensors may be connected to thermal cycler **106** or controller **130** to provide feedback for temperature control.

[0053] When reaction vessels **202** are at the controlled temperature(s), excitation light with a selected spectrum and intensity may be transmitted sequentially to each reaction vessel **202** from the corresponding light emitter **110** through the corresponding window **126**. For example, blue LEDs may be used to provide the source for the excitation light. The frequencies of the LEDs may be selected depending on the particular application and the desired excitation light frequencies. The spectra of excitation light for different reaction vessels may be different or the same depending on the application. The LEDs may be activated

sequentially to emit pulsed light. For example, each pulse of light may have a pulse length of about 0.3 seconds.

[0054] As can be appreciated, light emitters **110** may be configured to direct the respective excitation light toward the corresponding windows **126** with reduced interference between different light emitters **100** or from background light. For the latter purpose, light emitter **110** may extend to close to the corresponding window **126**. Further, a light filter, if desired, may be conveniently installed in light emitter **110** for improved performance.

[0055] When certain chemical reactions occur in the reaction solutions, the reaction products may be fluorescent and can emit light of certain frequencies when they are excited by the excitation light received from light emitters **110**. The light emitted by the solutions may be of a different spectrum than that of the incident light. The light emitted by the solution is transmitted through window **128** and is detected by detector **114**. By detecting the intensity of light of selected frequencies, it can then be determined whether certain target substance is present in the reaction vessel. In this regard, lens **118** can help to guide and focus light emitted from windows **128** toward detector **114**, thus increasing the detection sensitivity; and filter **116** can reduce the intensity of background or noise, thus improving signal to noise/background ratio.

[0056] To differentiate the signals from different reaction vessels **202**, different reaction vessels **202** may be illuminated sequentially one at a time. The illumination period for each reaction vessel **202** may be relatively short, such as about 0.3 seconds, to allow faster cycle time. The illumination period however should be sufficiently long in order to obtain a detectable signal. Controller **130** may be used to control the activation of individual light emitters **110** and correlate the detected light signals with the respective reaction vessels **202** (thus the reaction mixtures therein).

[0057] As can be understood, in some applications, it is also possible to determine whether certain reactions have occurred by detecting and monitoring if the fluorescence emission from a fluorescent reagent has decreased. Such

decrease may indicate that the amount of the reagent in the mixture has decreased due to certain chemical reactions.

[0058] The detected signal may be analyzed by controller **130** or output to another data analyzing device (not shown) for analysis. The detected signal and results may also be displayed on user interface **132**. The detected signal from detector **114** may also be amplified or pre-treated by other signal processing techniques known to persons skilled in the art.

[0059] As can be appreciated, real-time control and monitoring of the chemical reactions in the reaction vessels can be conveniently achieved.

[0060] For a given application, controller **130** may be provided with special software components to execute commands and functions for, e.g., control of the system start-up, checking if any particular hardware is still functioning properly, control of thermal cycling for PCR operation, or optical detection of multiplex fluorescence signals *in situ*.

[0061] For instance, the apparatus may be programmed to detect light signals at the end of each annealing cycle during the thermal cycling of a PCR process.

[0062] Conveniently, a single detector may be used to detect emission lights from different reaction vessels **202**, which receives excitation lights from different light emitters **110** (or LEDs).

[0063] The detected signals from detector **114** may be amplified and processed using a conventional signal processing computer program such as Labview™ program. The computer program may include functions for averaging the collected data. For example, the detected light signal may be converted to a electrical voltage signal, which varies with time. During each detection period for a reaction vessel (e.g. within 0.3 s), many, such as thousands, data points can be collected depending on the sampling rate. The computer program may provide a timed trigger to perform an averaging function to calculate the averaged signal strength within each (0.3 s) detection period. The trigger point may synchronized

with the trigger for turning on the corresponding LED. The average of each particular detection period may be used as the data value for that particular period. The signal intensity can thus be plotted against the cycle number for each sample. The averaged data may then be displayed and continuously updated through the user interface, such as a PDA (personal digital assistant).

[0064] For performing PCR such as RT-PCR, the reaction vessels or chambers may be preloaded with PCR such as RT-PCR mixtures. The PCR mixtures may include primers and probes in lyophilized form. Light emitters **110** may be used to emit excitation light to stimulate fluorescence emission from the target product and detector **114** may be used to detect multiplex fluorescence signals emitted by the reaction solution *in situ*. The fluorescence signals may be quantitatively correlated with the original amount of RNA or DNA sample, such as using a computer or controller **230**. Data may be automatically acquired, processed and displayed on user interface **232**.

[0065] Conveniently, the receptacles have simple structures and are relatively inexpensive to construct, and can be used to receive various reaction vessels, including specially designed reaction cartridges and standard reaction vessels such as standard test tubes. In some embodiments, apparatus **100** may be configured for a particular application so that there will be no moving or rotating part when the apparatus is in use. This can provide improved reliability and relatively simple operation.

[0066] Another embodiment of the present invention is related to a system for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions, which includes apparatus **100** and a cartridge, such as cartridge **200**, coupled to apparatus **100**, as illustrated in **FIG. 6**. The cartridge has reaction vessels such as reaction vessels **202**, which are simultaneously received in bores **122** of at least two receptacles **108** respectively. At least one of the reaction vessels contains a reaction mixture. The reaction vessels have transparent walls or windows for transmitting light therethrough. The system may also include a user interface such as a display unit that is in communication with apparatus **100** for receiving an output from apparatus **100** and

displaying information based on the received output. The output of apparatus **100** may be reflective of a light signal detected by detector **114**. The system may include a computer or microprocessor (not shown) for controlling its operation and managing its internal communication and communication with an external device.

[0067] Apparatus **100** may be modified. For example, it is not necessary that receptacles **108** are mounted directly on top of thermal cyclers **106** and in direct contact with thermal cyclers **106**. It may be sufficient in some embodiments that receptacles **108** are mounted on thermal cyclers **106** in a manner to allow thermal communication between them, such as through a heat-conducting intermediate.

[0068] The shapes and relative sizes of receptacles **108** may be varied depending on the particular application, and the structure of cartridge **200**.

[0069] Windows **126** and **128** may be provided on adjacent sides, or on the same side, instead of on opposing sides. Each window **126** or **128** may be completely open or may be provided with a transparent panel such as a glass screen.

[0070] Base **102** may also be modified. For example, the various components of apparatus **100** may be mounted to a frame, which serves as the base. In another example, the base may include an adjustable support (not shown) for supporting a component, such as a lens, a filter, or a detector.

[0071] The distance between adjacent receptacles **108** may also be adjustable to allow use with different cartridges. Inserts (not shown) for bores **108** may be provided to allow use of difference reaction vessels that have different cross-sectional sizes or shapes.

[0072] The bodies **120** of receptacles **108** may have different wall thickness. The external shape of receptacles **108** may vary. As discussed above, in some embodiments, multiple bores **122** may be provided in a unitary block (not shown) of heat-conducting material for receiving multiple reaction vessels. The block may have any general shape. For example, it may have a generally rectangular shape.

[0073] In some embodiments, receptacles **108** may be enclosed in a closed environment, such as to reduce undesired change or fluctuation of environmental conditions or to reduce risks of contamination.

[0074] In some embodiments, cartridge **200** may be formed of three portions, a top portion, a middle portion, and a bottom portion. The three portions may be separate portions and the middle portion may be sandwiched between top and bottom portions. The top portion may be shaped as a flat plate with bolt holes. Alternatively, top portion may be formed of a thin film or sheet such as a plastic tape which has an adhesive side. For example, the adhesive side of the tape may have a glue layer on its surface. The bottom portion may be generally plate-shaped but provided with bolt holes, pneumatic ports sealed with breakable seals and fluid conduits or channels. Seals may be formed of an adhesive tape. Pneumatic ports may be sealed using the adhesive tape. Alternatively, bottom portion may also be formed of a flat sheet such as a plastic sheet with an adhesive side that faces middle portion. Each port may be shaped to couple to a pneumatic conduit, such as a needle, through the seal. The middle portion may define a number of chambers. Each chamber may have a top opening and a bottom opening. Each top opening may be connected with a pneumatic conduit or channel, which extends initially laterally and then downwardly to a respective pneumatic port in the bottom portion, so that the corresponding chamber is in communication with the respective port.

[0075] Each bottom opening may be connected with a liquid conduit or channel, which extends initially laterally and then upwardly towards a top connecting conduit that extends along the top surface of middle portion. The bottom openings may be connected to a well through the conduits or channels in the bottom portion. The well may be connected with a conduit or channel which extends upwardly to the connecting conduit. Thus, the chambers are each in fluid communication with a respective port through its top opening, and are in fluid communication with one another through their bottom openings and the connecting conduit.

[0076] When the three portions are affixed together such as with bolts and nuts or with an adhesive tape or thermo-diffusion bonding, the channels are tightly sealed and form closed fluid conduits for allowing fluid communication between the chambers and between the corresponding pairs of pneumatic ports and chambers. One of the chambers may be used as a gene extraction chamber, which is not necessarily connected directly to a pneumatic port.

[0077] A chamber in cartridge **200** may have a generally elongated cylindrical shape and a sloped bottom, and may extend vertically between the top and bottom portions. In different embodiments, the chambers **418** may have a different cross-sectional shape and may be longer or shorter.

[0078] Cartridge **200** may be formed using any suitable material. For example, each portion may be formed from a polymeric material, such as polycarbonate, poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA), or the like. The cartridge body may be formed using traditional machining techniques, such as microinjection molding and computerized numerically controlled (CNC) machining, or using plastic injection molding, as can be understood by persons skilled in the art.

[0079] The internal surfaces of the reaction vessels **202** and conduits **204** may be cleaned or sterilized when desired or needed. In some cases, the internal surfaces may be coated with another material to modify the surface properties.

[0080] The sizes or dimensions of cartridge **200** and the reaction vessels **202** and conduits **204** may vary depending on the application. For biological applications, the sample amount is typically small, thus reaction vessels **202** and conduits **204** may have dimensions on the order of micro-meters. When the dimensions are too large, it may be difficult to use pneumatic pressures to transfer small amounts of fluids. On the other hand, the dimensions should be large enough to allow sufficient transfer rate of the fluids under pneumatic pressures, and to allow sufficient light signals to be generated for detection. In some embodiments, fluid conduits **204** may have dimensions in the range of about 0.2 mm to about 1 mm. The reaction vessels and fluid chambers should have sufficient

volumes for performing the particular desired reaction, process, or treatment. A conduit or chamber may have a volume on the order of 1 micro liter to 100 milliliter.

[0081] Different conduits or chambers may be provided in cartridge **200** for loading a sample, a lysis buffer, a conditioner, a wash buffer, and an elute buffer respectively. A gene extractor may be deposited in one of the conduits. The gene extractor may include a magnetic-based extractor, silica membrane, silica beads or another material that can attach to genes in a fluid with a high iron concentration. The genes may include DNA (Deoxyribonucleic acid), RNA (Ribonucleic acid), or mRNA (Messenger RNA). The gene extractor may be selected based on the particular genes to be extracted. Some of the conduits or chambers may be used for storing a reaction product, extracted genes, and a waste produced by the reactions respectively. DNA or RNA degradation reagent may also be preloaded in one or more chambers.

[0082] In some cases, adjustment of the gene binding condition may be required. The buffers loaded in the chambers may include buffers for gene binding (such as pure or 70% ethanol) based on the target gene binding conditions.

[0083] Gene extraction may be performed in cartridge **200** with a pre-treated sample fluid transferred from another chamber in the cartridge. Gene purification may be performed using a wash buffer stored in the cartridge. One wash buffer or different types of wash buffers may be used to wash the genes in multiple steps. If multiple wash buffers are used, two or more chambers may be allocated to store wash buffers. The waste may be later discharged if the cartridge is to be recycled, or disposed with the cartridge. Gene elution may also be performed in the cartridge. An elution buffer may be used to release the genes attached to the gene extractor and carries the genes to another conduit or chamber. The target genes may be collected to perform further reactions within cartridge **200**. The extracted genes or other reaction products may be transferred to reaction vessels **202** for amplification or detection.

[0084] The modification discussed above is for illustration purposes and is not exhaustive. Other modifications are also possible.

[0085] EXAMPLE:

[0086] A PCR mixture was prepared in a 0.2-ml PCR tube by mixing 15 µl of Taqman™ Fast Universal PCR Master Mix (#4352042, Applied Biosystems, Inc.), 1.5 µl of Taqman Assays-by-Design (Applied Biosystems, Inc.) containing primers and probe encoding for a green fluorescent protein (GFP) gene, 10.5 µl of deionized (DI) water, and 3 µl of cDNA converted from total RNA of brain tissue from transgenic GFAP-GFP mice by random hexamer priming using Taqman's reverse transcription (RT) reagent (#N808-0234, Applied Biosystems, Inc.). The length of the amplicon was 82 bp.

[0087] 25 µl of the PCR mixture was then transferred to a polycarbonate PCR chamber, followed by the addition of 15 µl of PCR oil to prevent evaporation.

[0088] The PCR chambers were mounted on a receptacle of a prototype of the apparatus as depicted in **FIGS. 1 to 3**. Three PCR chambers were mounted on the three parallel receptacles at the same time, which contained sample, positive control and negative control respectively.

[0089] PCR was performed by controlling the thermal cycler to obtain a temperature profile in the PCR chamber as follows: 95°C for 20 s (activation of polymerase), 40 cycles of amplification (denaturation at 95°C for 3 s, annealing and extension at 60°C for 30 s).

[0090] Fluorescence arising from DNA replication was detected in real-time using the detector on the apparatus and recorded as a function of cycle number. The intensity of the detected fluorescence is shown in **FIG. 7** as a function of time. The three data sets shown in **FIG. 7** were obtained from the same sample in different sample volumes (15, 20 or 25 µl). The results indicate that the detected signal did not vary significantly with changes in sample volume. Some of the PCR products were separated and visualized in 2% agarose gel with ethidium bromide staining. The presence of a distinct band of 82 bp was observed, which verified the real time detection result.

[0091] The test results confirmed that apparatus **100** can be used to automate PCR-based DNA testing and can be adapted to perform all necessary steps for conducting and monitoring PCR. With apparatus **100**, it is possible to simultaneously perform tests on a sample along with a positive control and a negative control. Thus, more accurate testing results may be obtained.

[0092] An embodiment of the present invention may be conveniently integrated or adapted to couple with a sample preparation unit, such as a cartridge that uses pneumatic pressure to transfer fluids between internal fluid chambers. For example, the cartridge may be constructed according to PCT Application No. PCT/SG2008/000222, entitled "Fluid Processing and Transfer Using Inter-Connected Multi-Chamber Device" and filed June 23, 2008, the entire contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0093] Exemplary embodiments of the present invention may be used in a variety of fields and applications. For example, they may have applications in clinical and point-of-care disease diagnostics systems. They may also be used by emergency response teams, at airports or post offices, or other locations where prompt detection or testing is desired in order to prevent spreading of infectious diseases.

[0094] Other features, benefits and advantages of the embodiments described herein not expressly mentioned above can be understood from this description and the drawings by those skilled in the art.

[0095] Of course, the above described embodiments are intended to be illustrative only and in no way limiting. The described embodiments are susceptible to many modifications of form, arrangement of parts, details and order of operation. The invention, rather, is intended to encompass all such modification within its scope, as defined by the claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An apparatus for conducting and monitoring chemical reactions, comprising:
 - a base,
 - a thermal cycler mounted on said base;
 - a plurality of heat-conducting receptacles mounted on said thermal cycler and in heat-communication therewith, each one of said receptacles comprising an opaque body defining a bore having an open end, a first window, and a second window;
 - a cartridge removably mounted on said receptacles, said cartridge comprising a plurality of light-transmitting reaction vessels, and comprising conduits connected to said reaction vessels for processing and transferring a fluid, said reaction vessels respectively received in the bores of said receptacles through the open ends of said bores;
 - a light emitter mounted on said base for illuminating said reaction vessels through the first windows of said reaction vessels; and
 - a light detector mounted on said base for selectively receiving and detecting light emitted from said reaction vessels through the second windows of said receptacles.
2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said light detector comprises a single photo-multiplier-tube (PMT).
3. The apparatus of claim 2, comprising a lens mounted on said base for focusing said light emitted from said reaction vessels onto said PMT.
4. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 3, comprising a plurality of light emitters each positioned for guiding said light emitted from said light emitter toward a respective one of said first windows.

5. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein said light emitter comprises a plurality of light emitters each positioned to illuminate a respective one of said reaction vessels.
6. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein said reaction vessels each has a generally cylindrical shape.
7. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein said bores of said receptacles are generally cylindrical.
8. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 7, wherein said first window and said second window of said each receptacle are configured to reduce transmission of light received from said second window to said light detector through said first window.
9. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 8, wherein said plurality of receptacles consists of three receptacles.
10. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 9, wherein said light emitter comprises a light emitting diode.
11. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 10, wherein said thermal cyclor comprises a cooler and a heater.
12. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein said cooler is a thermal electric cooler.
13. The apparatus of claim 11 or claim 12, wherein said heater is an electric heater.
14. The apparatus of any one of claims 11 to 13, wherein said cooler and heater are integrated.
15. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 14, comprising a heat sink mounted on said base, said thermal cyclor being mounted on said heat sink.
16. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 15, comprising a controller in communication with said thermal cyclor for controlling said thermal cyclor.

17. The apparatus of claim 16, wherein said controller is in communication with said light detector for receiving a signal in response to detection of light by said light detector.
18. The apparatus of claim 17, wherein said controller controls said thermal cycler to selectively heat or cool said reaction vessels in response to receiving said signal.
19. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 18, comprising a plurality of light filters each positioned between said light emitter and a respective one of said receptacles.
20. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 19, comprising a light filter positioned between said receptacles and said light detector.
21. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 20, wherein said receptacles are made of copper or brass.
22. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 21, wherein said conduits of said cartridge comprises conduits configured for preparing and treating a sample to be reacted or detected and for transferring said sample to one or more of said reaction vessels.
23. The apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 22, wherein at least one of said reaction vessels of said cartridge contains a reaction mixture.
24. The apparatus of claim 23, wherein said reaction mixture is a nucleic acid amplification reaction mixture.
25. The apparatus of claim 23, wherein said reaction mixture is a polymerase chain reaction mixture.
26. A system comprising the apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 25 and a user interface in communication with said apparatus, wherein said apparatus generates an output, and said user interface receives said output and displays information based on said output.

27. The system of claim 26, wherein said output comprises output reflective of a light signal detected by said detector.

28. A method of operating the apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 25, comprising:

preparing a plurality of reaction mixtures in said cartridge;

placing each one of said reaction mixtures in one of selected ones of said reaction vessels;

controlling said thermal cycler to selectively heat or cool said selected reaction vessels and thus said reaction mixtures in said selected reaction vessels;

sequentially illuminating said reaction mixtures in different reaction vessels with said light emitter; and

detecting light emitted from said reaction mixtures with said light detector.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein said controlling comprises controlling said thermal cycler in response to detection of said light emitted from said reaction mixtures.

30. The method of claim 28 or claim 29, comprising displaying to a user an output in response to a result of said detecting.