A 2 × 2 quantum dot array with controllable inter-dot tunnel couplings

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The interaction between electrons in arrays of electrostatically defined quantum dots is naturally described by a Fermi-Hubbard Hamiltonian. Moreover, the high degree of tunability of these systems makes them a powerful platform to simulate different regimes of the Hubbard model. However, most quantum dot array implementations have been limited to one-dimensional linear arrays. In this letter, we present a square lattice unit cell of 2 × 2 quantum dots defined electrostatically in an AlGaAs/GaAs heterostructure using a double-layer gate technique. We probe the properties of the array using nearby quantum dots operated as charge sensors. We show that we can deterministically and dynamically control the charge occupation in each quantum dot in the single- to few-electron regime. Additionally, we achieve simultaneous individual control of the nearest-neighbor tunnel couplings over a range of 0–40 μeV. Finally, we demonstrate fast (~1 μs) single-shot readout of the spin state of electrons in the dots through spin-to-charge conversion via Pauli spin blockade. These advances pave the way for analog quantum simulations in two dimensions, not previously accessible in quantum dot systems. © 2018 Author(s). All article content, except where otherwise noted, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). https://doi.org/10.1063/1.5025928

Electrostatically defined quantum dots in semiconductors have been proposed as the basic underlying hardware in quantum computation,1 as well as digital and analog quantum simulations.2–5 This is due to their ease of tunability, control of the relevant parameters, fast measurement of the spin and charge states, and their potential for scalability. In particular, quantum dot arrays are natural candidates for simulating the Fermi-Hubbard model, as they adhere to the same Hamiltonian

\[ H = \sum_i U_i n_i | n_i \rangle \langle n_i | + \sum_{i,j} t_{ij} (c_i \dagger c_j + h.c.) - \sum_i \mu_i n_i + \sum_{i,j} V_{ij} n_i n_j. \]  

The on-site interaction energy \( U_i \) corresponds to the quantum dot charging energy on site \( i \), and the hopping energy \( t_{ij} \) corresponds to the tunnel coupling between dots \( i \) and \( j \). The chemical potential term \( \mu_i \) controls the electron number in each dot, as well as the relative energy detuning between dots. For quantum dot arrays, there is an additional term \( V_{ij} \) that describes the inter-site Coulomb interaction energy. The operators \( c_i, c_i \dagger \) and \( n_i \) in Eq. (1) represent the second quantization annihilation, creation, and number operators, respectively, with the individual spins of the electrons being denoted by the subscripts \( \sigma = \{ \uparrow, \downarrow \} \). For simplicity, we have assumed that no external magnetic field is present in the system.

For the study of Fermi-Hubbard physics, control of the ratio \( U/t \) is essential.6–8 The hopping term can be tuned electrostatically, covering a range of \( t \approx 0–100 \) μeV between nearest neighbors in a linear array.9 The on-site interaction energy \( U \) is set by the shape of the confinement potential and is not freely tunable, but it can be accurately measured with typical values of 1–10 meV.10 Similarly, \( V \) is not tunable independently but can be measured precisely.

Quantum simulations of the Fermi-Hubbard model have previously been explored experimentally in cold atom systems,11–15 manipulating arrays of the order of 100 atoms. However, these experiments are often limited by the initial entropy of the system.12–14 Quantum dot arrays can overcome this problem by operating in dilution refrigerators, where electron temperatures can reach \( kT_e \sim 1 \) μeV. On the other hand, experiments with quantum dots are still mainly being performed with linear arrays with no more than a few sites.9,16,17 Efforts to go beyond 1D with quantum dot arrays have so far stopped short of achieving well-characterized tunnel couplings in the few-electron regime.18–20

In this letter, we report on the design, fabrication, and measurement of a quantum-dot plaquette in a 2 × 2 geometry. We describe a fabrication technique used to implement a two-layer gate structure needed for this device. We then present measurements that demonstrate deterministic filling of electrons in all dots and controllable tunnel coupling over a large range (0–40 μeV) between all nearest-neighbor pairs. As the final ingredient for this quantum simulator, we perform single-shot measurements of the two-electron singlet/triplet states \( |S,T⟩ \) using two dots in the array.

The device contains electrostatically defined quantum dots formed by selectively depleting electrons using nanofabricated gate electrodes on the surface of a GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructure. The gate pattern is designed to form four quantum dots in a 2 × 2 geometry, where the nearest neighbors are cyclic, i.e., \( i + 4 = i \) [Fig. 1(a)]. The coupling of quantum dots in a 2 × 2 geometry, where the nearest neighbors are cyclic, i.e., \( i + 4 = i \) [Fig. 1(a)].
each of the dots to its own electron reservoir is controlled through the constriction created between the $B_{i+j}$ and $C_i$ gates. This is designed to allow for operation of the quantum dots in the isolated regime; however, we do not explore this configuration here. Deterministic electron filling of the quantum dots is achieved by adjusting $\mu_i$ relative to the Fermi energy of the reservoirs, through the use of the gates $P_i$. A center gate ($D_0$) reaches the substrate at the center of the plaquette. Biasing this gate negatively effectively separates the dots from each other. It thereby suppresses tunnel couplings along the two diagonals of the array and also influences the nearest-neighbor tunnel couplings (along the perimeter of the array) since the combination of $D_0$ with a $C_i$ gate controls $t_{i,j+1}$. The device design also includes an extra set of gates ($X_i$, $Y_j$, $S_k$) used to define two larger dots to be operated as charge sensors. The GaAs/AlGa$_{1-x}$As heterostructure is Si-doped, with a two-dimensional electron gas at the 90 nm deep interface. The density at the 90 nm deep interface ($x$ structure is Si-doped, with a two-dimensional electron gas). 

Fig. 1(a) shows the schematic of this layer. The $D_0$ gate runs above gate $C_3$ and contacts the substrate at the center of the array with a foot of $\sim$50 nm radius. It is fabricated using 10/100 nm evaporated Ti/Au and isolated from the bottom layer gates using a 50 nm thick, 200 nm wide, and 1.5 $\mu$m long dielectric slab of Si$_x$N$_y$, fabricated using sputtering and lift-off. For this step, an 80 nm thick layer of AR-P 6200 (Ref. 23) is used as the e-beam resist and lift-off is performed in hot (80°C) N-Methyl-2-Pyrrolidone. A scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of a completed device is shown in Fig. 1(b).

The device was cooled down with positive bias voltages (see values in Table I) on all gates in order to decrease charge noise. All the $P_i$ and $C_i$ gates are connected to high-frequency ($\approx$1 GHz) lines for pulsing and fast sweeping. One reservoir for each sensing dot is connected to a resonant RF circuit for high-bandwidth (up to 3 MHz) charge sensing. The two readout circuits have resonance frequencies of 84.5 and 130.6 MHz, are connected to a single amplifier chain, and are read out simultaneously using frequency multiplexing. By measuring charge stability diagrams using different combinations of gates, we can identify and tune the four dots to the few-electron regime. In Figs. 1(c) and 1(d), we show examples of two charge stability diagrams, where we have identified the charge states of the four dots, ranging from (0000) to (4142), where $(klmn)$ indicate the charge occupation of dots 1 through 4. The different cross-capacitances between the dots and the gates lead to charge transition lines with four different slopes in the charge stability diagrams, corresponding to the filling of the four dots.

Using these diagrams, appropriate voltages can be applied to the gates to achieve deterministic filling of the dots. Although we can reach the regime with one electron in each dot, it was difficult to tunnel couple all neighboring dots. We attribute this to the center gate being slightly too large. To bypass this problem, we keep the first orbital shells of dots 1 and 3 filled with two electrons each. In this configuration, the electron wavefunction is larger, which facilitates tunnel coupling neighboring dots. However, it is important to note that in this configuration, the unpaired electron occupies an antisymmetric (2p) orbital, which can result in effects such as a sign inversion in the tunnel coupling. The gate voltages needed to achieve (1111) and (3131) charge states are specified in Table I. We perform finite voltage-bias measurements to extract the lever arm (see Table I) between gate voltage and dot chemical potential energy. Using these, the charging energies for the four dots are then estimated from the distance between charge transition lines in the charge stability diagrams [$U_{1,2} = 2.1$ meV, $U_{3,4} = 2.3$ meV (3 electron dots) and $U_{2,4} = 3.4$ meV, $U_{3,4} = 3.3$ meV (1 electron dots)]. From the same diagrams, we also extract the inter-site Coulomb interaction energies $V_{1,2} = 0.67$ meV, $V_{2,3} = 0.55$ meV, $V_{3,4} = 0.47$ meV, and $V_{4,1} = 0.39$ meV.

We next characterize and control the four inter-dot tunnel couplings. Starting with the array in the (3131) charge state, we measure $t_{ij}$ by moving to a gate voltage configuration that removes one electron from the system and is centered at $\mu_i = \mu_j$ while keeping the other two dots (slightly) detuned. Around this point, the charge stability diagram shows an inter-dot transition line [Fig. 2(a)]. As we sweep the voltage along the detuning axis (perpendicular to the inter-dot transition), the charge sensor signal displays a step as the extra electron moves over from one dot to the other. The width of this step is dependent on the tunnel coupling $t_{ij}$ and the electron temperature $T_e$. Figure 2(b) shows a sample measurement where the sensor signal is plotted as we sweep the gate voltages across the inter-dot transition. This signal is then fitted to extract $t_{ij}$ given $T_e \approx 70$ mK

FIG. 1. (a) Schematic of the gate design, with the dot locations labeled in the center. (The first layer in the top inset and the bottom inset shows a schematic of the dot plaquette, with relevant Hubbard model terms.) (b) SEM image of a device from the same batch as the one used for measurements. The overlaid blue circles are impressions of the dot wave-functions. (c) and (d) Charge stability diagrams showing controlled filling of all four quantum dots in the single- (c) and few- (d) electron regime. The data in (c) and Fig. 3 were taken in one device cooldown and the data in panel (d), Table I, and Fig. 2 in another cooldown.
$(-6 \mu eV)$. $T_\rho$ was measured by fitting a similar trace for the case $t \ll T_\rho$. Note that this measurement of $T_\rho$ provides an upper bound for the charge noise. From the fits to the current traces, we derive the excess charge as a function of detuning between the two dots [Fig. 2(b)].

Nearest-neighbor tunnel couplings can be controlled electrostatically by opening/closing the constrictions created between $D_0$ and the $C_i$ gates. However, if we vary these gates only, the cross-capacitance between these gates and the dots results in unwanted changes in the chemical potential of the dots. To remedy this, we map out a cross-capacitance matrix that expresses the capacitive coupling between all gates and the dots. To keep the cross-capacitances to remain constant and the changes in the individual dot energies can be expressed as linear combinations of gate voltages

$$\delta \mu_i = G \delta V[i],$$

where $\mathbf{G}$ is a $4 \times 4$ matrix of cross-capacitances: $C_{ij} \equiv P_{ij} = \delta \mu_i/\delta V_j$, where $\delta \mu_i$ is the slope of the charge transition of dot $i$, which can be extracted from a charge stability diagram.

Once extracted, $\mathbf{C}$ can then be used to define virtual gates that allow us to vary one of the $C_i$ or $D_0$ gates, while simultaneously adjusting all the $P_i$ gates to keep $\delta \mu_i = 0$. For example, for $C_i$, the adjustment of $P_i$ can be calculated from

$$\begin{bmatrix} \delta \mu_1 \\ \delta \mu_2 \\ \delta \mu_3 \\ \delta \mu_4 \end{bmatrix} = -\mathbf{C} \begin{bmatrix} \delta P_1 \\ \delta P_2 \\ \delta P_3 \\ \delta P_4 \end{bmatrix}.$$

This technique significantly simplified the process of adjusting the tunnel barriers and was a key element in achieving effective tunnel coupling control. In Fig. 2(c), this control is demonstrated by uniformly setting all four tunnel couplings to $5$ GHz ($\sim 20 \mu eV$, blue traces) and $10$ GHz ($\sim 40 \mu eV$, red traces).

Finally, we demonstrate single-shot read-out of two-spin states using a three-stage pulse. The Pauli exclusion principle is used to convert a charge measurement into a measurement that distinguishes between singlet and triplet states of two spins occupying neighboring quantum dots. We follow a protocol used previously to read out spins in a double dot where a random two-spin state is loaded in the $(1,1)$ charge configuration. The detuning between the dots is then pulsed to favor tunneling towards the $(2,0)$ charge state. For a singlet ($|S\rangle$), tunneling to $(2,0)$ is allowed. For a triplet ($|T\rangle$), however, the Pauli exclusion principle requires the $(2,0)$ state to occupy the first excited state orbital of the dot, which is energetically inaccessible ($\sim 0.4 \text{ meV}$ away). Therefore, spins in $|T\rangle$ remain in the $(1,1)$ state until they relax to $|S\rangle$, with rate $1/T_\Gamma$. To identify the spins states, we monitor the charge sensor signal at a specific time $\tau_m$ after the start of the read-out pulse. We integrate the signal for $0.1 \mu s$ around $\tau_m$. If the integrated signal exceeds a fixed threshold, we conclude that the charge state was $(1,1)$, indicating a $|T\rangle$ spin state.

The read-out fidelity is limited by several factors. A histogram of the integrated sensing dot signal at time $\tau_m$ constructed from 10000 single-shot measurements with a random initial spin state shows two peaks, corresponding to the signal measured for each of the spin states. Due to noise in the current traces, there is a small overlap between the two peaks that will lead to spin read-out errors. From a double Gaussian fit to the histograms, we extract an error...
contribution \( e_N \approx 0.006 \). When averaging 10 000 complete read-out traces, the sensor signal shows an exponential decay, with a time constant \( T_1 \) [Fig. 3(c)]. The \( T_1 \) value varies with inter-dot detuning, reaching up to \( T_1 = 11.4 \, \mu s \). A relaxation event before \( \tau_m \) leads to a measurement error, and so, it is important to keep \( \tau_m \) short. In order to achieve a sufficient signal-to-noise ratio, we low-pass filtered the signal with a 1 MHz cut-off, which in turn leads us to choose \( \tau_m = 0.8 \, \mu s \). The \( |T| \) measurement error due to relaxation is then \( e_{T1} = 1 - \exp (-\tau_M/T_1) = 0.07 \). This is the dominant source of error in this system, with smaller error contributions from thermal excitation, with average signal obtained from 10 000 read-out traces. The solid line is an exponential fit, from which we extract the relaxation time \( T_1 \).

In summary, we have implemented and operated a quantum dot plaquette with reliable control of electron filling and tunnel coupling, for which we demonstrated single-shot spin measurements. This makes this system a promising analog quantum simulator of Fermi-Hubbard physics. The two-dimensional lattice configuration presents symmetries not accessible in the more common linear arrays, enabling the emulation of phenomena such as Nagaoka ferromagnetism and resonating valence bond states, which have been predicted for high-temperature superconductors. Moreover, using the two-layer fabrication technique shown here, the \( 2 \times 2 \) geometry can be extended directly to a ladder of quantum dots (size \( 2 \times N \)), which is the smallest system capable of showing pairing in under- or over-doped lattices and other interesting quantum phases. Moreover, leveraging the fabrication experience of the semiconductor industry, quantum dot arrays might be scaled up to \( N \times N \) arrays, opening up a host of possibilities.

Raw data and analysis files supporting the findings of this study are available from https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1219088.

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31 W. Pauli, Phys. Rev. 58, 716 (1940).