

Wellesley College CS115/PHYS115
Robotic Design Studio

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COURSE INFORMATION

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Location: SCI 261. (SCI E218, E225, and E226 are also available as work areas.)
Phone in SCI 261: 283-3452.

Meeting Times: 1pm -- 5pm, Mon. -- Thu., Jan. 3 -- 25. A few notes:

- The robot lab (SCI 261) will be accessible around the clock, and we encourage you to tinker there outside the "official" hours of the class.
- There is no official meeting on Fridays or on Martin Luther King day (Mon., Jan. 15), but the robot lab will be on these days so you can work on design challenges and your final project.
- All students in the class are expected to participate in the Robot Exhibition from 4:30 -- 6pm on Thu., Jan. 25 and the cleanup party immediately following (6pm -- 8pm).

Course Web Sites: There is a web site with information pertaining specifically to this year's version of the course at:

<http://nike.wellesley.edu/~rds/>

For example, information about your fellow students, your Nike account, and creating a web page for your robot can be found at this site.

We also maintain a web site for Robotic Design Studio, containing general information about the course at:

<http://www.wellesley.edu/Physics/robots/studio.html>

Course Overview

In this intensive introductory course, you will have an opportunity to design and assemble robots out of LEGO parts, sensors, motors, and miniature computers (Handy Boards and Crickets), and then program your creations to do your bidding. We start by learning some fundamental robotics skills in the context of studying and modifying a simple robot known as SciBorg. Then, working in small teams, you will design and build your own robot. The course culminates in a Robot Exhibition on Thursday, January 25, from 4:30 -- 6pm, in which you will show off your robots to the Wellesley community. This is a festive event that is attended by students, faculty, staff, and their families.

This course is rooted in *constructionism*, whose main tenet is that people learn best when actively engaged in hands-on projects that are personally meaningful and enjoyable.

Robotic projects tie together aspects of a surprisingly wide range of disciplines, including computer science, physics, math, biology, psychology, engineering, and art. Here are some of the concepts and skills you can expect to learn in this course:

- robot = sensors + controller + actuators;
- simple programming: robot commands, control flow (sequencing, conditionals, loops, procedure calls, concurrency), procedural abstraction;
- basic electronics: voltage, current, power, motors, sensors;
- fundamental mechanics: building robust structures, friction, power transmission, gearing, LEGO design clichés;
- animal and machine behavior, with ties to biological, cognitive, and social science;
- simple web page design.

You will also get hands-on exposure to some of the “big ideas” of engineering:

- hypothesis testing and debugging;
- making iterative improvements;
- working with *systems* (design in multiple domains, subpart interaction);
- designing *behaviors* (sophisticated behaviors can arise from relatively simple rules);
- working in the real (noisy, messy, unpredictable *etc.*) world;
- divide-and-conquer strategies for problem solving;
- modularity and abstraction;
- feedback and control;
- paying attention to *aesthetics*;
- the value of simplicity and robustness.

We believe that this kind of exposure to the important ideas of engineering should be a critical part of today’s liberal arts education. A grounding in these ideas is necessary in order to understand our times and our culture. The best way to become fluent with these ideas is to become a designer and a builder. In today’s liberal arts curriculum there is a relative absence of design and building for students of science or technology. (In contrast, there tend to be lots of design experiences for artists and humanities students.)

Prerequisites

The only prerequisite for this course is a willingness to learn about, and have fun with, robots. The course is not just for scientists --- all creative people are encouraged to participate!

Credit

One-half (0.5) units of credit will be awarded for successful completion of this course. This credit counts toward the Natural and Physical Sciences (NPS) distribution. As of this writing, Robotic Design Studio does **not** count as a laboratory course.

Reading Materials

We will hand out several articles, manuals, and notes during the course, and will post suggested reading where appropriate. All handouts will also be made available from the course web page.

Homework

In addition to design challenges and other hands-on activities in during class time, you will be asked to complete several homework assignments. Assignments will typically involve reflecting and expanding on work done in class, thinking about points raised in reading, or documenting stages in the design and construction of your robot.

Individual Design Journal

Each student is required to maintain an individual design journal to document her journey through the course. The design journal is a single artifact that should contain all of the following:

- lecture notes taking during class.
- answers to homework assignments.
- documentation of your solutions to the design challenges, including sketches, code, and explanation of strategies.
- documentation detailing the design and construction of your final project, including words, sketches, and code.
- other thoughts/observations/sketches inspired by the hands-on activities, reading, *etc.*

We encourage you use a bound notebook such as a composition notebook or a spiral notebook for your design journal. We recommend that you do **not** use a loose-leaf binder for your design notebook. You should date each entry to the journal, and tape or glue loose materials (such as code listings) to pages into the journal.

You should use your design journals as a kind of diary in which you write down/sketch all thoughts, designs, etc. you have that are relevant to the robot course. If you have an idea, don't wait until later to jot it down; jot something down right away and then maybe flesh it out more later. Don't be obsessed with making the journals excessively neat, since this may reduce your probability of jotting things down. On the other hand, do try to make the writing legible.

We will examine your design journals in class at regular intervals throughout the course to check off your progress on challenges and to provide feedback on your robot designs. At the end of the course, you will submit your final design journal, which should contain a detailed description of the process by which your final project took shape. The write-up of your final project design in your journal should be something that has evolved on a day-to-day basis, and not something you compose in a mad dash at the end of the course!

Group Robot Project

The second half of the course is devoted to the robot project, in which you will work in a team of two or three people to design, build, exhibit, and document a robot. The project is open-ended; you should brainstorm with your teammates about projects that are fun, exciting, and challenging, but at the same time realistic. To give you a sense of what's possible, you should browse the web pages describing projects from previous incarnations of the course (1996 -- 2000). These are accessible from:

<http://nike.wellesley.edu/~rds/museum.html>

When forming teams for your project, it is wise to choose teammates with complementary strengths. For example, it's good to have members with programming experience, mechanical know-how, artistic sense, and good writing and presentation skills.

As part of your robot project, you will be expected to do the following:

As a group:

- *Develop* a preliminary design for your robot, including sketches, descriptions of behavior, and perhaps some high-level pseudo-code. All groups will give a brief presentation of their robot designs in class on Tue., Jan 18. As part of the presentation, you should write up and distribute a preliminary design document to the class.
- *Build* the robot you have designed. This is an iterative process in which you will build, program, test, see what works and what doesn't, and make changes to the design. You repeat this process until you are done (rare) or you run out of time (more likely).
- *Document* your robot with pictures, text, and code in a World-Wide Web page that will forever remain a part of the Robotic Design Studio electronic museum.
- *Exhibit* the robot you have built at the Robot Exhibition on January 25, 1999.

As an individual:

- *Document* the design and implementation of the robot in your design journal.

Grades

Rather than focusing on a grade, we hope that you will focus on learning a lot and having fun while building creative robots. After all, students during two previous WinterSessions ('96 and '97) built *very* impressive projects without receiving any credit at all!

Your grade for the course will be determined by three factors:

1. Your design journal, which includes your homework assignments and your individual documentation for your group final project.
2. Your group robot project, particularly the web page documenting your robot.
3. Your class preparedness and participation. It is expected that you will attend all classes (although we understand that travel plans may prevent some students from attending the first day of class).

Grading will be fairly lenient; conscientious participation in the course is likely to earn a grade between an A and a B.

Collaboration Policy

We strongly encourage you to get to know all of your classmates and to collaborate extensively with them. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the course, it is likely that you will be strong in some areas but weak in others. Please share your strengths with others, and don't hesitate to ask others for help in the areas in which you feel that you are weak.

In your design journal, all observations, reflections, and documentation should be in your own words. You may reference the ideas of your classmates, but should give them proper attribution in your writing.

Laboratory and Computing Environment

Classes will be held in Science Center room 261; the nearby rooms SCI E225, E226, and E218 will also be used as additional laboratory space. These rooms will collectively be referred to as the "Wintersession Robotics Laboratory". These rooms will be unlocked during the normal weekday hours of the Science Center. However, you will have access to the rooms 24 hours a day, 7 days a week during Wintersession; details will be announced in class. We will add you to the list of students with after-hours access to the Science Center. Students on this list can call Campus Police from the Sage entrance to be let into the Science Center when the doors are locked. Science Center policy requires that every student have a "buddy" when working after hours. (Note: before calling Campus Police, try the robot lab (x3452) to see if there's a classmate there who can let you into the building.)

The lab is equipped with 12 Gateway PC computers. If you have a PC laptop you can use it for this class if you like. (Most of the software also works for Macs; ask us for details.) We will primarily use the following applications during the course:

- *Handy Logo* and *Cricket Logo* : program development environments for the Handy Boards and Crickets;
- *Winsock-FTP* : a file transfer program for uploading files to and downloading files from the net.
- *Claris Home Page* : a web-page builder;
- *Paintshop Pro* : an image manipulation program for preparing JPEG photos shot with the digital camera.

Each student will be given a computer account on the Nike file server where **she should store her personal work at the end of each class day**. Details on accessing Nike via Winsock-FTP are provided on the course web page. Students are also encouraged to make backups of their work onto floppy disks or Zip disks.

FirstClass Conference

The CS115-w01 FirstClass conference is a place for member of the class to communicate with each other. It has the following subconferences:

- CS115-w01 Announcements: Robbie and Lyn will make course announcements here.
- CS115-w01 Q&A: This is the place to ask questions or answer questions from others.
- CS115-w01 Challenges: This is the place to post working code for your challenge problems.

Course Schedule

There are thirteen three-hour class meetings, which naturally split into two categories:

1. During the first six class meetings, we will teach you the basics of robot design. These meetings will consist of lectures interleaved with numerous hands-on activities in which you will modify an existing robot or build a simple robot from scratch.
2. During the last seven class meetings, you will work with your teammates on the design and implementation of a robot for your final project.

Below is a tentative schedule for the class:

Wednesday, January 3 (Class 1) *Introduction to Robotic Design*

- Course administrivia.
- What is a robot? Sensors, actuators, and controllers.
- Introduction to the Handy Board, a palm-sized computer for robot controllers; executing simple commands and downloading programs.
- Introduction to Handy Logo, a programming language for the Handy Board: actuator & sensor primitives; control flow (sequencing, conditionals, loops); procedural abstraction.
- *Challenge 1*: Build your own kinetic sculpture

Thursday, January 4 (Class 2) *Robot Programming*

- Kinetic sculpture show-and-tell.
- More Handy Logo, level triggered vs. edge triggered, variables, simple multitasking.
- Introduction to SciBorg, a pedagogical robot.
- *Challenge 2*: How does SciBorg follow a line?
- Saving work to Nike account via Winsock-FTP.
- *Challenge 3*: Simple SciBorg modifications (you may do this as homework).
- *Challenge 4*: Modify the SciBorg to do the following:
 - 1) **ping-pong** "bounce" back and forth between walls using front and rear touch sensors.
 - 2) **escape**: escape from barricaded surroundings.
 - 3) **sobriety-test** - improve SciBorg line-following behavior by minimizing constant weaving on relatively straight portions of track.
 - 4) **light follower** - get SciBorg to "home in" on a bright light source.
- *Challenge 5*: Sensor interaction (homework).

Friday, January 5 (No Class)

- Although there is no class today, we will keep the lab open so that students can continue to work on challenges and play with the equipment.

Monday, January 8 (Class 3) *LEGO Mechanics: Building Sturdy Structures*

- Review SciBorg challenges.
- Overview of LEGO Technic components.
- Idioms for robust LEGO construction.
- *Challenge 6:* Build an "indestructible" LEGO box that can survive a 6-foot fall.

Tuesday, January 9 (Class 4) *LEGO Mechanics: Building Moving Structures*

- Indestructible box discussion.
- Power transmission: motors, gear trains, speed vs. torque trade-off, friction, worm gears, bevel gears, differential gears, chains and treads.
- *Challenge 7:* Build a single-motor racing vehicle. The vehicle will participate in a 3 meter race carrying the Handy Board and a 1.0 kg mass.

Wednesday, January 10 (Class 5) *Iterative Design, Crickets*

- Testing and improving your racing vehicle designs, pre-race trials.
- Introduction to the Cricket, Handy Board's smaller cousin.
- Cricket examples: dancing crickets, spider, scientific instrumentation
- *Challenge 8:* Communicating Crickets

Thursday, January 11 (Class 6) *Vehicle Races, Sensors, Concurrency*

- Vehicle races
- Sensors: Analog vs. digital sensor, standard sensor configuration, simple electronics, detailed description of how reflectance sensor works, demonstration of various sensors.
- *Challenge 9:* find 10 different kinds of sensors in your environment (dorm, classrooms, science center, campus, *etc.*) (homework).
- *Challenge 10:* find an interesting animal sensor and write a couple of paragraphs about what it's used for and how it works (homework).
- Concurrency: launching processes, when demons, stopping processes, process families
- *Challenge 11:* decomposing behaviors using concurrency (homework).
- Final project overview.
- Pick teammates for final project

Friday, January 12 (No Class)

Monday, January 15 (No Class: MLK Birthday)

- Although there are no classes on these days, we will keep the lab open so that interested students can play. This is a good time to brainstorm with your teammates on the design of your final project.

Tuesday, January 16 (Class 7) *Design Session*

- Robot project brainstorming
- Show and tell: robots from previous years.
- Video festival: *Robo-Pong*, *The Way Things Go*, and more!
- Work on preliminary robot project design: descriptions of behavior, sketches

Wednesday, January 17 (Class 8) *Preliminary Design Presentation*

- Present preliminary design to class for feedback.
- Begin implementation of robot projects.

Thursday, January 18 (Class 9) *Web Page Design, Robot Implementation*

- Web-page Tutorial: Making web pages via Claris Home page; how to incorporating picture and video into your robot project web pages.
- Groups continue to implement and document robots.

Friday, January 19

- Although there is no class today, we will keep the lab open so that groups can work on their final projects.

Monday, January 22 (Class 10) *Robot Implementation*

- Groups continue to implement and document robots.

Tuesday, January 23 (Class 11) *In-Class Exhibit*

- **Groups present robots in preliminary in-class exhibit to get feedback.**
- Robot implementation and documentation continues.

Wednesday, January 24 (Class 12) *In-Class Exhibit*

- **Post draft web pages for feedback.**
- Robot implementation and documentation continues.

Thursday, January 25 (Class 13)

- Last-minute modifications to robots.
- Testing robots in the exhibit space (Sage Lounge, 2nd floor of Science Center)
- **Robot Exhibition:** 4:30--6pm in the Sage Lounge.
- **Cleanup Party:** 6pm--8pm in SCI 396. Cleanup of room 261, accompanied with pizza. **All students are expected to help with the clean up!**

Friday, January 26

- **Individual design journals and group robot web pages due by 5pm.**