

Lecture 1 — Introduction to Embedded Systems

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About the Course

We'll start by reviewing the highlights of the class syllabus. Please read it carefully (it is available in Learn). It contains a lot of important information about the class including: the lecture topics, the grading scheme, contact information for the course staff, and university policies.

Introduction to Embedded Systems

A general-purpose definition of embedded systems is that they are devices used to control, monitor or assist the operation of equipment, machinery or plant. “Embedded” reflects the fact that they are an integral part of the system. In many cases, their “embeddedness” may be such that their presence is far from obvious to the casual observer. Even the more technically skilled might need to examine the operation of a piece of equipment for some time before being able to conclude that an embedded control system was involved in its functioning.

(Institute of Electrical Engineers)

Where can you find embedded systems?

- Cellphones/other communications systems
- Microwaves/thermostats/other appliances
- Industrial automation
- Medical devices
- Transportation: aviation and automobiles

Two types of embedded systems. The term *embedded system* covers many systems. Simple embedded systems might be constructed out of electronics without a processor or control software. Complex embedded systems incorporate one or more processors along with control software.

Another term is *embedded computer system*, which overlaps with complex embedded systems. We'll call an embedded computer system a special-purpose computer system designed to perform a set of tasks without the user's knowledge of its existence.

Example: Exhaust Gas Recirculator Many vehicles have a device in the engine called the Exhaust Gas Recirculator (EGR).

- *Problem:* car engines produce oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) when they burn too hot.
- *Solution:* The best way to do that is to recirculate already-burned exhaust gases, which don't burn again, thus lowering the temperature.

- *When?* It's difficult to figure this out. Hence, embedded systems.

Mechanically, the EGR contains a valve which lets exhaust gases back into the combustion chamber.

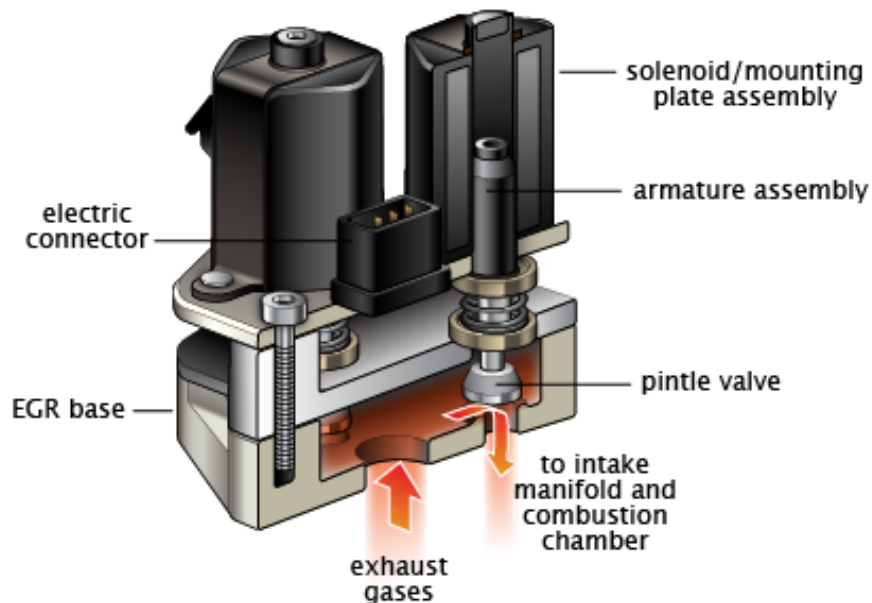


Image courtesy of ClearMechanic.com

<http://repairpal.com/exhaust-gas-recirculation-system>

First Approach. When you step on the gas, this opens, and then closes, the EGR valve. However, you don't need, or want, EGR on a cold engine, because it lowers the engine's performance. So, GM put a fully-mechanical thermal switch in its cars. Unfortunately, this didn't work well, because mechanical components often don't work the way you want them to, as you'll find out.

More Mechanical Components. Car manufacturers added more components, like vacuum amplifiers, delay valves, and solenoids, to fix the issues: "spaghetti" tubes.

Embedded Systems in EGRs. Today's solution is to use a small embedded system to control the EGR valve.

What are the inputs and outputs of the EGR system?

Inputs: RPM, throttle, temperature (sensors)

Outputs: signal to the valve; pulse-width modulation (actuators)

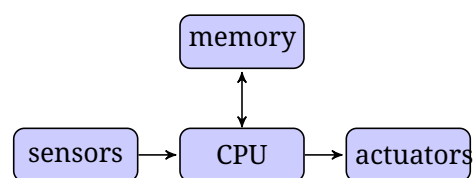
Design Constraints. There are two main constraints when choosing which processors (or electronics) to include in your embedded system.

- **Processor power:** The processor must be able to crunch enough bits. In particular, it needs to have good enough latency (response time) and bandwidth (processing power) to control the systems it's responsible for. Plus, you need to be able to model its performance characteristics.
- **Environment:** You have to be able to embed the processor. In particular, you have to respect size, power and connectivity constraints.

Challenges. Beyond meeting the design constraints, it's harder to write code for embedded systems than for PCs for a few additional reasons:

- Variability: Programming Windows systems is all the same, while programming cellphones is quite different from programming EGRs.
- No/bad UI: Can't necessarily put a print statement into a microwave oven's embedded system, nor can you put it in the state you'd want to.
- No API: An embedded system might not contain any operating system to speak of.
- Hard to get at: Have to load the software onto the system, which can be hard.

Block Diagram. Here are some parts of a typical embedded system.



Sensors provide input to the CPU, while actuators enable the CPU to affect the outside world.

Sensors and Actuators

Embedded systems differ from general-purpose computers in that their interaction with the outside world is much more important than in a general-purpose computer.

Sensors

Sensors convert input from the external environment into a form suitable for use by a computer system.

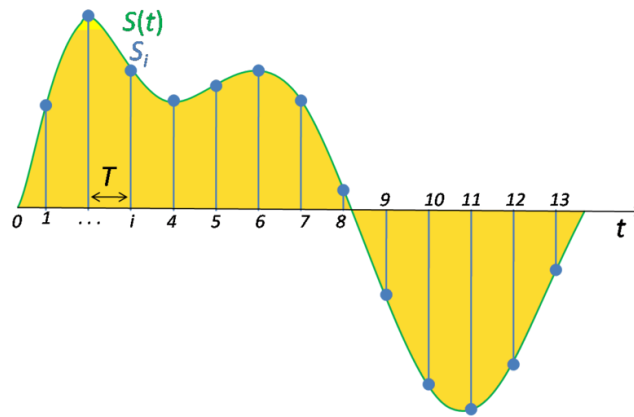
Most phenomena in the outside world are analog and continuous-time, while the computer is digital and discrete-time, so something has to convert between these realms.

For instance, a light sensor might represent intensity as an analog voltage, while the computer needs a stream of bits.

Analog-to-Digital Converters. To go between the realms, use an **ADC**, which converts a continuous-time analog signal into a discrete-time digital signal.

The conversion is approximate, and loses information if the samples are too infrequent¹ or if the samples don't capture enough information (i.e. their resolution is too poor).

¹See the Nyquist sampling theorem.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Signal_Sampling.png

Note that the digital signal is a finite set of pairs, each of which contains a sample and a time for that sample.

Actuators. Actuators convert output from the computer system into some effect on the environment. What are some examples of actuators?

motors, LCDs, LEDs, heaters/AC units, potentiometer, speakers

Some actuators require analog voltage signals. In those cases, you have to feed the discrete-time data to a digital-to-analog converter (**DAC**).

Combined Sensors and Actuators. Of course, we can combine sensing and actuating in a single device. Some devices automatically do this, like piezoelectric sensors. Any relatively modern game controller also combines sensors and actuators, particularly the Wii Remote. Phones also combine sensors and actuators.

Programming the Embedded System

We'll discuss how to program the CPU next. Programming an embedded system is somewhat similar to programming a computer, but there are differences in the programming environment and in the structure of the code. We run an *embedded control program* on an embedded system, e.g. a modem. It monitors sensor inputs and controls actuators. Some embedded computer systems use an embedded operating system to manage devices and run embedded applications. Such systems behave much like a general-purpose computer. For example, a cellular phone might run an embedded operating system that allows a user to start and terminate applications.

Let's talk first about the structure of the code. Embedded control programs:

- boot automatically on device power up;
- never terminate under normal use;
- process a stream of inputs and outputs; and
- care about timing.

Embedded control programs may run on top of embedded operating systems. An *embedded operating system* is a special type of operating system designed for use in embedded computer systems; it has these properties:

- is compact and efficient;
- cares about battery life;
- provides APIs between devices and application software; and
- favours portability.

Therac-25

The Therac-25 cancer radiation therapy machine is one of the most famous cases of engineering failure. It's referenced in practically every book about software failures, engineering books, and so on. This is especially the case where the authors or intended audience are Canadian, because the machine was developed by Atomic Energy of Canada Limited. Three patients died as a result of the many problems with the system [Cas98]:

- **Race Condition:** A race condition existed between the operator interface task and the equipment control task. This did not occur in testing because AECL did not expect that operators would enter commands in such a quick succession. As operators became more proficient with the system, they entered the commands faster.
- **Overflow:** A flag was incremented and an overflow caused the software to bypass the normal safety checks.
- **Interlocks:** The maximum power setting was enabled without the thick metal plate being in place.
- **Incorrect Feedback:** Although patients had received a fatal amount of radiation, the machine showed that the machine had not delivered the prescribed dose, causing operators to deliver another dose.

Someone has to build these embedded systems, and lives, including yours, will depend on them.

Collaborative Course

The source material for the ECE 155 notes and slides is now open-sourced via Github (<http://www.github.com>), an online collaboration tool. Later on we will learn about `git`, but if you're already familiar with it, so much the better. Whether or not you know how to use `git`, if you find an error in the notes/slides, or have an idea on how to improve them, go to <https://github.com/jzarnett/ece155> and open an issue.

If you know how to use `git` and \LaTeX , then you can go to the URL and submit a pull request (changes) for me to look at and incorporate!

References

[Cas98] Steven Casey. *Set Phasers on Stun and other true tales of design, technology, and human error*. Aegean, 1998.