

# Dynamic Mathematical Display

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It is often forgotten students are learning to build a better future. As a group of students, we are looking to create a form of innovative technology that provides a learning experience through two of the most important learning methods: visual and kinesthetic. To provide hands-on learning experience, we have created the Dynamic Mathematical Display (DMD). The DMD is a device with pins in a three by three grid. The pins are 150mm length, 12.5mm width, and each controlled by individual motors and slide potentiometers. The dynamic movement of each pin is measured by the potentiometer's linear resistance, which is monitored electronically by a computer program. That program will engage the pin to move to a given point projected from 3D graph. The main purpose of the DMD project is to create a morphing table that will allow a user to visualize complicated 3D graphs with all their components such as depths and peaks. These components will be represented by light emitting diodes (RGB LEDs), which are attached to each pin. The LED's are programmed to provide color based on the physical location of the pin at the time according to the projected graph. Both instructors and students will have the option to manipulate the brightness and color of the LEDs. While the pins provide kinesthetic information to a graph, the LEDs provide additional visual information similar to a topographic map, enhancing the learning experience of a student by presenting more realistic and information-rich representations of physical models.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As students we all wish to seek a better way to learn, and help others in our community. Technology is one of the best ways to accomplish this. There are twelve ways of learning that are known to society, this project is made for the purpose of emphasising kinesthetic and visual learning. Students at an advanced level of calculus are often struggling with the visualization of complicated mathematical graphs. Instructors are not always able to provide good resources for better visualization of mathematical problems. Being concerned with that, the idea of making the Dynamic Mathematical Display (DMD) that would be able to represent complicated three dimensional shapes was brought up. An article written by MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) brought to our attention. MIT's researchers are able to build an apparatus that is able to form shapes of various complexities by using slide potentiometers. In order to provide better visualization of shapes, a projector is used to represent the height of the motorized pins that were used as linear actuators with different colors depending on their position in space. The DMD is built in order to accomplish a similar task, but focus more on the academic potential of the apparatus. The

built apparatus should be able to represent different mathematical equations in three dimensional space. Thus, students in different educational institutions would be able to visualize graphs in three dimensions.

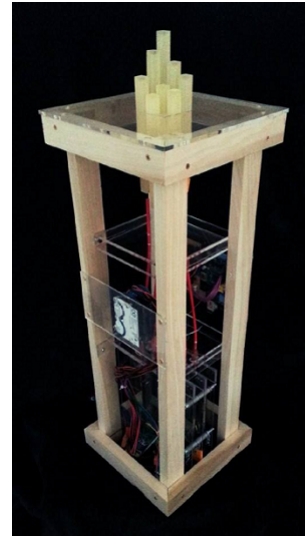


FIG. 1. The Dynamic Mathematical Display.

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Kinesthetic and visual types of technology are used for educational purposes for all ages. For example; in order to improve the motor abilities in children, they get to play with small things with which they have to form shapes. The construction set LEGO is

used for this purpose in many cases. Modeling clay is also used to provide visual and kinesthetic learning for individuals of all ages. Individuals can form various shapes by using their hands. Even the process of three dimensional printing would take a part in kinesthetic learning where an individual can print a designed shape in three dimensions and get a physical object.

This type of technology has a great academic potential for students to support learning process and to improve their cognitive and recognitional skills. It can help students to learn; as the actuators can move based on an equation to give a better, more descriptive representation of a graph. Math will no longer just be a drawing on the board, but an actual physical shape. Topographers can even use this type of technology for mapping the depth for various landscapes so it can be more visible to a user. Math instructors would be able to explain students material more effective and give them better understanding of the subject.

This work explores the possibility to provide kinesthetic and visual learning to society. The DMD was built as a result of the research based on ways to improve students learning. The purpose of DMD is to provide the opportunity to visualize complicated mathematical graphs in three dimensions. This purpose could be achieved by not only motorized pins that represent a point on the graph, but also, by tricolor light emitting diodes (RGBs). Colors of RGBs represent the depth and the height of each point on the graph in three dimensions. Since several techniques were used for the apparatus to improve its visualization, it adds more stability to accomplishment of the purpose.

## II. PHYSICAL CONSTRUCTION

The DMD uses a three-by-three grid of motorized translucent acrylic pins to represent a mathematical display. The acrylic pins are three dimensional printed rectangular pins with height 150mm and width 12.5mm. With its translucent material, the user is able to see different varieties of color emitted from the LEDs which are attached to the pins. Push-pull rods and the linkage are used to connect the pins and the slide potentiometers together. The linkage (Gold-N-Rods) transfers upward and downward force from the motorized slide potentiometer. All nine slide potentiometers are mounted onto three Adafruit Motor Shield and an Arduino Uno. The Adafruit Motor Shield is used to drive the DC motor of the slide potentiometer that moves the pins in a bi-directional motion. Also, the DMD uses Arduino Uno to microcontrol the movement of the acrylic pins. A program is written specifically for the arduino to receive a serial input with target position data, and move the pins to the desired target position smoothly

and efficiently.

In order to have a structure to hold all the materials together, a wood table is created. The table is rectangular shaped with dimensions 609.6mm tall 45mm width and length. In addition, plexiglass was used for mounting all of the materials including slide potentiometers, linkages, Acrylic 3D pins, LED control boards, Arduino Uno, Motor Shield and Raspberry PI together acting as a support. The transparent property of the plexiglass displays the interior of our materials clearly, allowing user to observe how DMD works internally.

## III. THE BUILDING PROCESS

### A. Prototype

In process of searching for the way to resolve students frustrations with Multivariable calculus classes, the idea of building the DMD that would be able to graph three dimensional graphs was brought up. Once the idea of the apparatus is introduced to the group, the concept of the building process started to develop. First of all, the group agreed on the purpose of the construction: had to have ability of building three dimensional graphs for better visualisation. During months of brainstorming, several ideas of how to execute the purpose were brought up. One of those ideas became the prototype for now functioning device. Actual design of DMD was based on less elegant prototype which had its own limitation that were improved in actual design. Collaboration of members of the group allowed to develop design of the prototype from just a concept idea.

In the beginning, the DMD would have the same overall structure but each pin would be driven by a stepper motor. Pins themselves didnt have any linkages but were fastened to the motor with the pinion that would slide on cut rack for the pinion. Prototype pin was three dimensional printed, thus, the pinion rack placed inside pins frame was accurate enough for the pinion to slide smoothly.

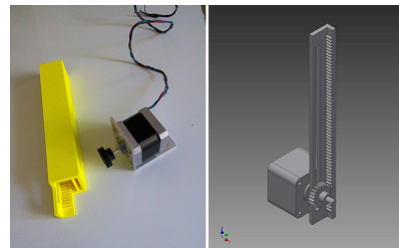


FIG. 2. First prototype included stepper motor and pinion rack.

The rack (pin) was controlled in depth by the stepper motor with a pinion attached to it. The stepper motor was controlled by arduino uno microcontroller and allowed a user to have full control over the system through a computer. Original pin is 32mm wide, 200mm long and 4mm thick and it has LED slot for all wiring required for LEDs inside. Dimensions of the original pin added some complications to the design of three project. Since it was massive the resolution of graphs would be very poor. Due to the stepper motors large individual size, the spacing between pins would be disproportionately large. If the spacing between pins is huge, the resolution of the final graph would go down.

Another obstacle that was overcome is overheating of the stepper motor. The stepper motor was replaced with a slide potentiometer. Such a change added several advantages to the system. Overall dimensions of the apparatus shrunk and more compact. Due to the fact that slide potentiometers were put in use, the dimensions of the pins were significantly changed. The whole pin structure was redesigned. Pinion rack and pinion itself were replaced by linkages. Linkages would attach to the side of a pin and the other side of linkage would attach to the potentiometer's slider. Improvement in design of the system allowed to overcome slipping problem that occurred during the process of pinion sliding along the pinion rack (See figure 2).

#### IV. RED-GREEN-BLUE LIGHT EMITTING DIODES (RGB LED) DISPLAY

In addition to the movement of the pins, tricolor LEDs are used to provide another dimension to the DMD. The LEDs are mounted inside of each pin to appear integrated with them. Having another dimension allows the visibility of more data such as minima and maxima. The tricolor nature of the LEDs allows the mixing of light to form the entire color spectrum. LEDs help enhance users experience when using the DMD. As mentioned in the introduction, a topographer could potentially benefit using LEDs to analyse differences in landscape shapes.

Another reason for having RGB LEDs in each pin is to improve the definition of the graph that is going to be represented. Having an apparatus capable of producing an image characterized by fine details defined with LED lights will enhance the picture of any given generic equation. In order to accomplish the task of making visualization of the display better, several parts had to be designed and constructed according to specifications of the apparatus.

The LED control board is a three-inch by four-inch pre-drilled circuit board with 0.1inch hole spacing. The board hosts three latching shift registers, nineteen

potentiometers, eighteen NPN transistors, a single two-position terminal header, a single protection diode, two 0.9 microfarad capacitors, one one-thousand ohm resistor, one fifty-one ohm resistor, two insulated test points, a nine-position header strip, a twenty-eight position dual-row header strip, and 30 gauge insulated wire.

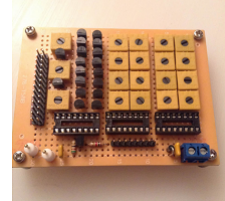


FIG. 3. RGB LED control board.

#### A. Coding

There are three different programs running on a total of two devices, an Arduino Uno and a Raspberry PI computer. The devices are configured in a master-slave setup. The PI acts as master and takes user input to calculate all information needed to be displayed. The Arduino acts as slave and directly controls each motor for the data supplied to it.

To outline the program running on the PI, there are 3 parts, user input, serial communication, and data processing. User input is a simple text-based interface that runs from a console. Mathematics is an integral facet of the DMDs operation so a way to take a function and have the computer understand it was a challenge overcome in this project. To use the function, it was broken up into numbers, variables, functions, and operators (tokenized). Then the tokens were organized into reverse polish notation (postfix) using the shunting-yard algorithm. A short definition for tokenized postfix notation is breaking up elements where postfix notation is a mathematical notation for which operators follow their operands. Once the data was transformed into the more efficient notation, it was calculated using a postfix interpreter. Because the variables change for every pin, it was interpreted several times with new data for each pin. Communication is done over usb serial and is bi-directional. It is running at the default 9600 bytes per second. There are two types of data being sent, the function for displaying on the screen, and the data for the pin. To signify the different type going over, a unique pattern was used as a start marker. For data processing, a viewing window is defined and split up for the different location of pins. For each value of the pin, a different location of x and y axes is used and the interpreter uses the new variable to generate a new value. The parts are then fed into the interpreter with

the new location variables. To make sure all parts of the graph is visible within the window, the pin height data is recorded for its maximum and minimum values. The values are then transformed to be a percentage between zero and one-hundred (normalized).

The program on the Arduino Uno is very simple, having only serial input for pin height and a feedback loop to make sure it gets there properly. The Arduino has limited processing power so to make sure it runs as fast as possible we limit the amount of data sent over serial and directly send the pin height as the exact byte values rather than a text representation. Because of the slow refresh rate, the several ways of controlling the pin were tested. Some of the implementations are blocking and work one pin at a time, whereas others ended up jittery and don't settle to the correct value. To prevent jittering, a small dead-zone is in place where the program accepts the pins actual height as close enough.

### B. Programming and Control of Motors

The basic function of the arduino is to receive an input with position data and to move the pins to the desired target position. The arduino starts by setting up communications with the serial port and communicating with the motor shields. It then runs a calibration function which calibrates the position of the pins relative to the reference voltage received from the slide potentiometers. The calibration function works by driving the pins upward until they hit a hard stop, then it reads the potentiometers' position and records it as the maximum value. After the value is recorded the pins are driven downward until they hit a hard stop at the bottom. It again reads the potentiometers' position and records it as the minimum value. Once the value is set, the motors are released.

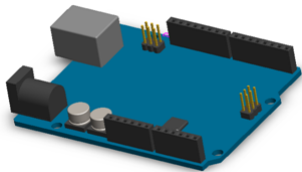


FIG. 4. Three dimensional drawing of Arduino Uno.

After the setup and calibration, the code enters the main loop. The main loop constantly cycles through updating the pins current position, checking for serial data, checks target position limits, sets motor speed, and checks or moves the pins.

The current position of each pin is checked and

recorded by reading the analog potentiometer values. The pins are labeled as a grid with A, B and C in a row, 1, 2 and 3 in a column. Potentiometer A1 is read directly from pin A3 on the arduino, all other potentiometers are connected to the 10 bit analog port expander (MCP3008). All values are remapped from the minimum value approximately and maximum value approximately 1023 to a new range of 0 to 100.

When the serial data is available it is received in the form of 18 bytes. The bytes are put into a buffer and then deciphered into position data for each pin. Each pin uses two bytes for its target position. A user feedback is also given to send the values it received back through the serial port. The code then checks to see if the input data is within the valid range of pin travel. If it is not, it will scale all values to fit the limitations of DMD table.

The speed of the pins are set by an external potentiometer. The value is read from arduino pin A2 and is remapped from (0 to 1023) to (0 to 255), this value is stored as Speed. The speed of the motors are then set by using the set speed function called from the adafruit library. Each motor is then controlled by checking their current position and comparing it their target position 1. This happens in two steps by utilizing two if statements, one for forward movement and one for backward movement.



FIG. 5. Three slide potentiometer mounted on an acrylic piece.

### V. RGB LED PROGRAMMING

Each tri-color LED displays different colors using the Python programming language with the RPIO package. The decision for Python as the programming language is due to its rapid implementation and common use in real-world applications. The RPIO package provides Python both necessary access and tools for controlling communication pins on the Raspberry PI.

The program may run from the terminal window and requires nine three-byte hexadecimal numbers. Every byte in the hexadecimal input corresponds to a red, green, and blue value of the given LED. The program





FIG. 6. Acrylic pins with RGB LED's.

then scales the hexadecimal value to an integer ranging from zero to one-hundred; this number determines how many sub-cycles each color in every LED will illuminate.

The LED Control program sets up one-hundred sub-cycles that repeat every twenty milliseconds. Thus, the program sends values to the shift registers in data bursts that occur every two-hundred microseconds. The data bursts determine which LEDs are illuminated until the next data burst is received. To maintain stricter color representation the LEDs do not output while data transmission occurs. This results in a one-hundred-microsecond data transfer time, an approximate duty cycle of fifty percent, and a refresh rate of fifty hertz.

Variations of the red, green, and blue brightness allow the eye to perceive different colors. For instance, a fully on blue and red light will appear purple; or fully on red and green lights will appear yellow. If all three colors are fully on, the light will appear white. The way the eye perceives color is a combination of red, green, and blue light due to its trichromatic nature; as a result, the LEDs in the DMD can represent one million different colors.

Early prototypes of the program involved using loops to switch the LEDs on and off. Although the pulse-width and frequency of the switching was easily adjustable, visible stutter occurred while the programming loops were running. The cause of the visible stutter is due to loops using RPIO require high resource usage of the Raspberry Pi; therefore, a certain command may not run in real-time, causing the LED to toggle later than desired. As a result, a new method for controlling the pins was required.

The RPIO package comes included with PWM class designed to control servomotors. The PWM class can control any communication pins output by utilizing DMA channels. The usage of DMA channels reduces the need for simultaneously running loops while greatly reducing computer resource usage. The PWM class toggles pins at repeating intervals based upon conditions set by the programmer. The variables for the PWM output are the DMA channel, a pulse-length granularity, and a repeat interval at which the programmed pulses repeat. The pulse-length granularity, or time resolution, and the repeat interval are set in microseconds. For this project, the granularity of the pulse length is one

microsecond and then repeat interval is set to twenty-thousand microseconds, or twenty milliseconds.

While the PWM class resolved the issue of high resource usage, it introduced a couple timing restrictions. For instance, the PWM class does not allow one pin to toggle on and another to toggle off within the same pulse-length granularity window. In practice, this means that no shift registers can accept different data simultaneously. Another issue with timing is the inability to have a pulse window smaller than five microseconds [experimentally]. Although pulses can toggle pins at a timing resolution of one microsecond, if the pulse length was smaller than five microseconds the Raspberry Pi would not provide any output. As of this writing, it is unsure if the limitations are hardware or software based.

Due to the PWM classes inability to toggle multiple pins within the same microsecond window, each pin uses programmed offsets for data transmission. Five data bits are required every clock cycle; therefore, five different offsets are required for each clock cycle. The program toggles shift register pins in the following order: strobe signal, red shift register data, green shift register data, blue shift register data, and finally the clock signal. The final, or ninth LED, receives three separate signals directly from the Raspberry Pi near the ninety-five microsecond offset in the data burst time section.

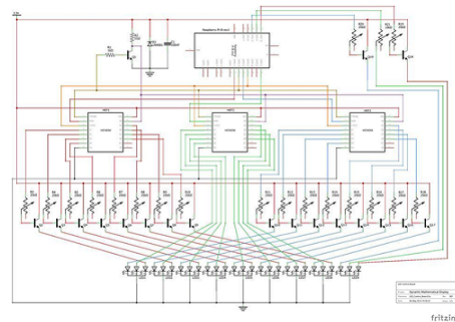


FIG. 7. RGB LED schematic.

## VI. ANALYSIS

### A. Apparatus Limitations

DMD was constructed to fully accomplish its purpose; however, there are certain limitations to the apparatus due to the design. One of the biggest limitations of the apparatus was it lacks the number of pins that represents specific points on the graph. The pins make up the resolution of the graph to be represented. Thus, lack of pins would make it harder for a user to visualize represented graph. Improvements of the actual design would resolve such limitations. Since the DMD was created strictly for

academic purposes, the only limitation is it lacks resolution. With the current resolution of the apparatus it is difficult to visualize the complexity of each graph. Thus, there are certain improvements that need to be made in order to thoroughly represent the concept of the DMD.

The DMD is able to represent graphs of various shapes. However, graphs that can be represented cannot have negative values and thus must be shifted in order for the DMD to build them. The DMD uses slide potentiometers that lift up the pins that are mounted by linkages. The origin of the tabletop of the apparatus is represented by pins with zero height. Since pins are 150mm long, maximum height that can be reached is 100mm from the table top. Change of pins initial height would allow a user to model graphs with negative values as well as positive. DMDs design is developed to represent only positive values of the graphs and thus such limitation would be an obstacle for a user.

Both of the obstacles that are listed above are added to the future work of the project. Therefore, further modifications are going to be made in order to overcome specified limitations.

## B. Graphial Equations

(-1,-1)	(-1,0)	(-1,1)
(0,-1)	(0,0)	(0,1)
(1,-1)	(1,0)	(1,1)

TABLE I. A table representation of pin location. The pins create a 3 by 3 grid array with the center, represented by (0,0) on this table, being the origin for our calculations.

Figures (8-15) represent the comparisons between the generic mathematical equation to the actual equation used, in addition the figures include plots of the sampled points the table moves the individual pins to. Due to pixel limitations the equations had to be shifted and scaled. Essentially, the actual equation is sampled at 9 points and those values are scaled and shifted then displayed on the table. Beta represents the amplitude scaling and alpha represents the shifting. Also, if beta is negative the negative sign will cause an amplitude reversal. The preferred graph had equation in which beta is equal to 1 and alpha is equal to 0; however, due to the limitations of the apparatus these equations had to be changed as shown above. That is, the original equation required a -z value, this meant the graph needed to be shifted up in the z axis to avoid any negative values for z. Finally, scaling z has been scaled from 0 to 100 which represent the height of each pin.

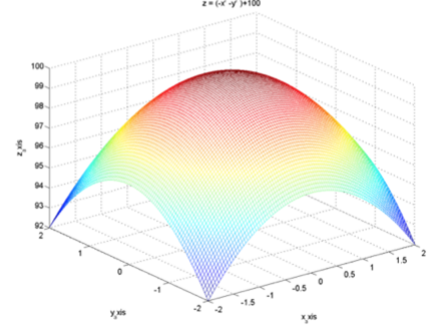


FIG. 8. Generic equation:  $Z(m,n) = -\beta((x+m)^2 + (y+n)^2) + \alpha$  where  $-\beta$  is representing a scaled amplitude reversal and  $\alpha$  represents a shift. To accommodate the fact that the table cannot display negative values we shift must utilize the shift value  $\alpha$ .

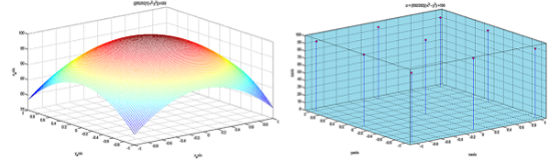


FIG. 9. Actual equation:  $z(m,n) = 99292(-(x+m)^2 - (y+n)^2) + 100$ . The amplitude has been scaled by 99292 and the plot shifted upward by 100 units.

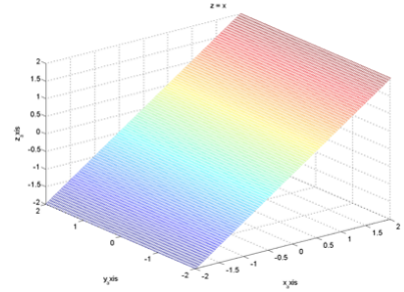


FIG. 10. Generic equation:  $Z(m,n) = \beta(x+m) + \alpha$ . This graph shows negative z values which cannot be fully represented with the apparatus due to the limitation of the pixels.

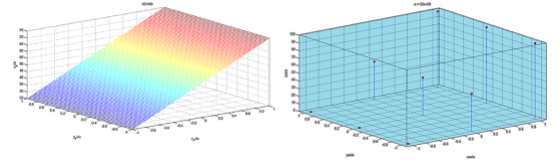


FIG. 11. Actual equation:  $Z(m,n) = 50(x+m) + 50$ . Amplitude scaled by 50 and shifted up by 50 units.

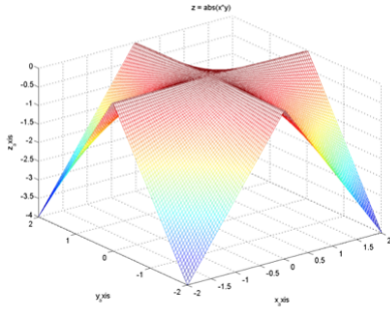


FIG. 12. Generic equation:  $Z(m,n) = \beta(-|x+m||y+n|) + \alpha$ . This graph shows negative  $z$  values which cannot be fully represented with the apparatus due to the limitation of the pixels.

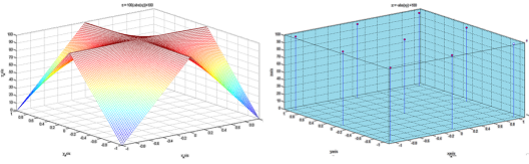


FIG. 13. Actual equation:  $Z(m,n) = 50(x+m) + 50$ . Amplitude scaled by 50 and shifted up by 50 units.

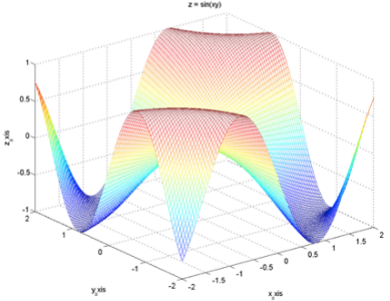


FIG. 14. Generic equation:  $Z(m,n) = \beta(\sin((x+m)(y+n))) + \alpha$ . This graph shows negative  $z$  values which cannot be fully represented with the apparatus due to the limitation of the pixels.

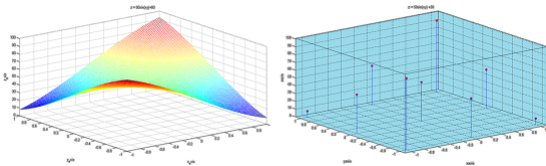


FIG. 15. Actual equation:  $Z(m,n) = 50(x+m) + 50$ . Amplitude scaled by 50 and shifted up by 50 units.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The Dynamic Mathematical Display was able to successfully model several forms of multi-variable equations. The RGB LEDs worked very well in enhancing the depth perception of the graph. The motor system that drives the pin yielded only 2 percent in error in positioning. The apparatus provided sufficient examples of tangible multivariable graphs. However, the three by three grid is too low in resolution, the DMD can only graph simply equations.

## VIII. FUTURE WORK

Due to the lack of resolution it was required to test the ability of the apparatus based on only a select few equations. This also required manipulating the equations to the convenience of the apparatus. If there was, however, an increase in resolution more complex graphs could be clearly represented within the project.

Due to limited number of pixels in the display, implementing a type of flexible material over the pins was needed to show a decent graph. In order to show a smooth surface graph, it was desired to put a material on top of the pins. However, due to the lack of a stop point on the potentiometer (knows its position) most materials that could be placed onto the pins would put force onto the motors. This would cause the motors to oscillate in attempt to go to the ordered position. Eventually this would burn out the motor. In the future, it would be best to have the ability to either have more pixels (preferably  $30 \times 30$ ) or have a motor to know its position and yet handle small amounts of force.

Another limitation of the apparatus is, it currently cannot show negative  $z$  values. As a result any generic graph with such values, must be shifted by a term  $\alpha$ . In the future, it would be more desirable to have a pin that could move more than 100mm. This however, would require different motor with more torque to lift a pin.

Lastly, with the current coding any equations to be displayed must be hard coded in. In the future it would be more desirable to have the ability to have a user interface which would work similar to a search engine. Liquid Crystal Display screen can be placed on the surface area of the apparatus allowing a user to see the type of the graph that is going to be represented.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- 2. Plexiglass
  - 3. Wood
  - 4. Slide potentiometer - Qty. 10
  - 5. Linkages
  - 6. Arduino Uno - Qty. 1
  - 7. Adafruit Motor Shield - Qty. 3
  - 8. Solder
  - 9. ADC with SPI Interface (MCP3008) - Qty. 1
  - 10. RGB LEDs - Qty. 9
  - 11. Shift Registers (CD74HC4094E) - Qty. 3
  - 12. Transistors (KSC1008YBU) - Qty. 19
  - 13. 3×4 Perf. Board - Qty. 1
  - 14. 2×2 Perf. Board - Qty. 1
  - 15. Potentiometer (Spectrol 63P253) - Qty. 18
  - 16. Potentiometer (Spectrol 64P103) - Qty. 1
  - 17. Capacitors (0.9uF) - Qty. 2
  - 18. Diode (1N4001) - Qty. 1
  - 19. PCB Terminal Block - Qty. 1
  - 20. 16 Pin Dip Sockets - Qty. 4
  - 21. 10mm Standoffs - Qty. 4

## Appendix A: Materials

1. Acrylic sheet