

1 PiSpy: An Affordable, Accessible, and Flexible Imaging Platform for the Automated
2 Observation of Organismal Biology and Behavior.

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22
23 Abstract:

24 A great deal of understanding can be gleaned from direct observation of organismal growth,
25 development, and behavior. However, direct observation can be time consuming and influence
26 the organism through unintentional stimuli. Additionally, video capturing equipment can often
27 be prohibitively expensive, difficult to modify to one's specific needs, and may come with
28 unnecessary features. Here, we describe the PiSpy, a low-cost, automated video acquisition
29 platform that uses a Raspberry Pi computer and camera to record video or images at specified
30 time intervals or when externally triggered. All settings and controls, such as programmable light
31 cycling, are accessible to users with no programming experience through an easy-to-use
32 graphical user interface. Importantly, the entire PiSpy system can be assembled for less than
33 \$100 using laser-cut and 3D-printed components. We demonstrate the broad applications and
34 flexibility of the PiSpy across a range of model and non-model organisms. Designs, instructions,
35 and code can be accessed through an online repository, where a global community of PiSpy users
36 can also contribute their own unique customizations and help grow the community of open-
37 source research solutions.

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48 Introduction:

49 Observation remains a scientist's most powerful and indispensable tool, especially in
50 organismal biology. From the keen examinations of Jean-Henri Fabre to modern-day trail
51 cameras, direct observation of organisms can yield both conclusions and new hypotheses [1].
52 However, observing key organismal behaviors may present challenges such as lengthy sessions,
53 required nighttime monitoring, or unintentional and/or disruptive stimuli from the observer.
54 Accessible and automated imaging equipment can ameliorate some of these challenges while still
55 retaining the benefits of direct observation.

56 In recent years, increased efforts to develop and share open-source equipment for
57 scientific research have provided accessible resources for both classical and modern
58 experimental approaches. For example, there now exists affordable alternatives, commonly
59 named "open labware," for microscopy, optogenetics, centrifugation, and orbital shaking [2–5].
60 Open labware presents many key advantages over commercial alternatives. The reduced costs
61 associated with open-source alternatives can benefit research labs with limited funding or allow
62 for increased throughput with the use of numerous low-cost devices. These resources can also be
63 used in STEM education where the high costs of specialized equipment may be prohibitive with
64 typical teaching lab budgets. Additionally, open labware can be more customizable than
65 commercially available versions, since their designs are distributed under open-source licenses,
66 which generally allow users to alter designs at their will with appropriate credit to the original
67 design [5]. Unlike proprietary versions that are protected under copyright licenses and cannot be
68 altered, this enables researchers to design, build, and use equipment suited exactly to their needs
69 rather than having to purchase alternatives that may come with unnecessary features or are not
70 quite designed for the intended research purpose (summarized in [6]).

71 A key development for open labware development has been the rise of affordable single-
72 board computers, the most popular of which is the Raspberry Pi [7]. Raspberry Pi computers
73 have the functionality of a full computer at a modest cost and have been used to develop various
74 open-source alternatives for scientific research. For instance, a Raspberry Pi, Arduino, and
75 various 3D printed and commercial parts were used to build FlyPi, a microscope capable of light
76 and fluorescent microscopy, as well as optogenetic and thermogenetic experiments [2].
77 Similarly, PiVR, a system to conduct closed-loop optogenetic experiments in freely-moving
78 animals was developed using a Raspberry Pi [8]. Notably, these and other Raspberry Pi-based
79 platforms come with the major advantages of open-source hardware; they are affordable,
80 customizable, and accessible. Raspberry Pis can help create cheaper alternatives to preexisting
81 equipment or can be used to develop equipment that is custom-made for specific tasks, especially
82 given the compatibility of the Raspberry Pi with sensors and other additional features [7].
83 Raspberry Pi-based devices can be transformative and greatly decrease the cost of science in
84 research and teaching environments. For example, FlyPi was introduced as a research tool to
85 MSc students, PhD students, and senior faculty members at universities in sub-Saharan Africa.
86 The flexibility of the FlyPi (and the Raspberry Pi itself) allowed it to be used both in its intended
87 purpose as a microscope, but also as a medical diagnostic tool [2].

88 One area in which Raspberry Pis have been used is in automated video and image
89 acquisition. Raspberry Pis can connect to a dedicated camera, and the picamera Python package
90 allows for a high level of user control with regards to its settings and functionality [9]. Across a
91 range of fields, various biological studies have used the Raspberry Pi as a camera device to
92 monitor behavior, growth, and development of animals, plants, and bacteria [2,10–14]. For

93 instance, the Raspberry Pi was used to create “POLIR,” an open-source, customizable system for
94 high throughput analytical microbiology imaging, and “Picroscope” uses the Raspberry Pi for a
95 microscope for simultaneous longitudinal imaging, with demonstrated applications in 2D and 3D
96 cell/tissue cultures and whole organism imaging of frog and zebrafish development and planaria
97 regeneration [10,14]. However, researchers are often required to program their Raspberry Pis and
98 create setups specifically for their studies (e.g. [12]). While this can be an effective solution in
99 labs that have both the required coding experience and development time to build a DIY research
100 tool, it can be a significant barrier to other research groups. Therefore, we find there is a need for
101 the development of an open-source camera device that is affordable, broadly applicable, and
102 accessible to users with little or no programming experience.

103 We have developed PiSpy, a device that uses a Raspberry Pi, Pi Camera, and a
104 combination of commercially available, laser cut, and 3D-printable parts. PiSpy can record high
105 resolution images or videos, with an 8 MP camera that can record videos up to 1080p. After
106 initial setup, PiSpy can operate without an active user to record at specified time intervals or
107 when triggered by an external source, such as a motion sensor or IR break beam. Using custom-
108 built LED light boards, we demonstrate that PiSpy can also automate a light-cycling program
109 while also capturing behaviors throughout a 24-hour period. All functionality for PiSpy is
110 controlled through an easy-to-use graphical user interface (GUI). PiSpy was designed to be
111 affordable, easy to use, and flexible, and all code and designs have been posted to a Github
112 repository (<https://github.com/gpask/PiSpy>) where users will be able to post their own
113 modifications. A category on Gathering for Open Science Hardware
114 (<https://forum.openhardware.science/c/projects/pispy/58>) has also been made to facilitate
115 troubleshooting and other PiSpy related discussion. Our hope is that the PiSpy can be applied to
116 a wide range of studies and contribute to the growing trend of powerful and accessible open-
117 source research tools.

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121 Results:

122 The base model of PiSpy for simple image or video capture is shown in Fig. 1A. A 3D
123 printable holder mounts both the Raspberry Pi and Raspberry Pi Camera v2 to a laser cut wooden
124 frame, allowing for easy height adjustment (Fig. 1A-B). The stands on the frame are also
125 reversible, and a 3D-printed ball and socket mounts the camera, allowing for free rotation (Fig.
126 1C). Optionally, the Raspberry Pi computer can connect to input and/or output components, such
127 as a motion sensor or lighting, respectively. This entire setup can be assembled for less than
128 \$100, or cheaper if multiple setups are being bought at once or certain features are omitted (S1
129 Table). A complete user’s guide and assembly manual can be found in the Supplementary
130 Materials and will also be continually updated on the GitHub repository
131 (<https://github.com/gpask/PiSpy>). The PiSpy GUI, written in Python3 using the TKinter package
132 [15], controls its primary functionality. Features include capture mode, timed or input-triggered
133 capture, light control, and camera resolution (Fig. 1D). For more advanced controls, such as
134 changing the default image/video name and storage location or the specific camera settings,
135 instructions are written in the user’s manual for how to edit these in the code itself.

136 PiSpy can capture animal behavior at several scales (Fig. 2A-B). Imaging of *D.*
137 *melanogaster* larval locomotion on an agar plate provided sufficient resolution for analysis with
138 image processing software (Fig. 2A, S1 Video), and video of crayfish behavior when placed in

139 an aquarium allowed for the observation of subtle movements of the swimmerets and legs, even
140 though the animals were underwater and being viewed through a plastic container (Fig. 2B, S2
141 Video). Automated image capture also makes PiSpy an effective device for capturing and
142 visualizing organismal growth over time (Fig. 2C-D). Time-lapse imaging of various beans
143 (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) growing in clear planters showed detailed root and shoot growth (Fig. 2C,
144 S3 Video). At a smaller scale, imaging of the soil bacterium *Bacillus mycoides* captured the
145 growth and expansion process over time (Fig. 2D, S4 Video). These time lapses allow for clear
146 visualization of organismal growth and could be used in a more formal study to compare and
147 quantify growth of different species or under different growing conditions.

148 PiSpy's flexibility also allows it to be customized for more specific research purposes.
149 For example, we have used PiSpy to monitor social behaviors in colonies of the Indian jumping
150 ant, *Harpegnathos saltator*. Because the ants are housed in nestboxes of a fixed size, we have
151 modified the wooden frame and mount to enclose the container to allow for easy overhead
152 recording of the colony (Fig. 3A). To maintain a light-dark cycle for the ants, we used PiSpy's
153 LED light control capabilities to be able to record behaviors throughout the day. Custom LED
154 printed circuit boards (PCBs) can be connected to the general-purpose input output (GPIO) pin
155 of the Raspberry Pi and allow for the cycling of white and red lighting (Fig. 3A). In our
156 experiment, the red light is not detected by the ants but allows for both day and night imaging
157 (Fig. 3B-C, S5 Video, S6 Video). Specific camera settings are used to record in each different
158 lighting conditions to ensure the desirable imaging quality. We have programmed in default
159 camera settings for day and night recording, but the user's manual provides instructions for how
160 to modify these within the PiSpy code. For monitoring of organisms that would be affected by
161 red light, infrared (IR) lighting and the Raspberry Pi NoIR camera could similarly be used to
162 record at night. It is our hope that users will create their own modifications of the PiSpy
163 hardware and/or software and will share these for use by other researchers and inspire further
164 customizations.

165 The GPIO pins of the Raspberry Pi can also be used to trigger image or video capture
166 with an external sensor, such as a motion sensor or IR break beam. In our setup, an ant disrupts
167 the IR beam as it walks to a foraging arena, and again when it returns to the main colony
168 carrying a cricket (Fig. 3C, S7 Video, S1 Fig.). As an alternative to automated recordings at
169 fixed time intervals, triggered recordings such as these could be used to monitor specific
170 activities, such as feeding patterns or other behaviors.

171
172 Discussion:

173 Considering the current success of custom-developed, Raspberry Pi recording rigs in
174 specific research purposes [12,13], there is a clear need for a broadly applicable, open-source,
175 and accessible device that can be used in future studies. We have developed PiSpy to provide
176 this resource while maintaining a low assembly cost and user-friendly interface. We hope that
177 the open-source design allows for customization of both the hardware and software by
178 researchers across the globe, and any updates or modifications made to PiSpy can be publicly
179 shared on the GitHub repository and discussed on the GOSH forum. As demonstrated above,
180 PiSpy can currently already be applied to a broad range of studies with various organisms, and
181 its flexibility and ease of modification means it could easily be used in an immeasurable number
182 of future experiments. Just as PiSpy was initially inspired by FlyPi, we hope scientists can use
183 this as a springboard for their own innovations and ideas for open-source hardware in the future.

184 PiSpy can be especially useful in educational environments. Its low cost and ease of
185 assembly mean it could easily be purchased in bulk (further reducing the individual cost, see
186 Table S1), allowing for individual students or groups of students to each work with their own
187 device. Additionally, because PiSpy can facilitate a broad range of research questions, students
188 could use it to design their own independent experiments. Already, PiSpy has been used for
189 undergraduate courses in biostatistics and entomology for independent projects as part of a
190 course-based undergraduate research experience (CURE). PiSpy's affordability and accessibility
191 lends itself to informal learning environments, such as part of community science projects or
192 curiosity-driven self-learning. Finally, while little to no experience in 3D fabrication,
193 engineering, and coding is required to operate PiSpy, it presents the opportunity for motivated
194 users to develop proficiency in these valuable skills.

195 PiSpy's affordable, flexible, and accessible nature make it a robust tool for studying
196 organismal growth, animal behavior, and a myriad of other possible applications. Its low cost
197 and automated recording can increase throughput by using multiple devices, especially when
198 coupled to powerful video analysis tools currently available [16]. As novel customizations are
199 developed and shared online, we envision the evolution of the PiSpy as an emerging and
200 increasingly functional research and teaching tool across the biological sciences.

201

202

203 **Methods**

204 A complete User's Guide and Assembly Manual is deposited on Github
205 (<https://github.com/gpask/PiSpy>) and also included in the Supplementary Materials. For
206 troubleshooting and other discussion, please use the forum on GOSH:
207 <https://forum.openhardware.science/c/projects/pispy/58>.

208

209 **GUI**

210 The PiSpy GUI was written in Python3 using the TKinter package to interface with the Tk GUI
211 toolkit. It uses the GPAC MP4Box multimedia packager to convert .h264 files to .mp4. Different
212 aspects of the PiSpy's functionality are contained in their own classes, allowing for easier
213 creation/alteration of functionality by users.

214

215 **Bacteria isolation and growth:**

216 A small amount of soil from Middlebury, VT was placed in Trypticase Soy Agar+Glucose
217 (TSA+G) broth containing 17 g/L tryptone, 3 g/L soytone, 10 g/L dextrose, 5 g/L NaCl, 2.5 g/L
218 K₂HPO₄, and 15 g/L Agar. The broth was placed in an 80°C water bath for 10 minutes, then
219 removed and allowed to incubate at 25°C for 30 minutes. Using a sterile loop, the broth was
220 streaked onto a TSA+G plate and allowed to incubate overnight at 25°C. One large colony was
221 selected from the plate and used to inoculate a separate TSA+G plate in four places. Using the
222 PiSpy, images were recorded every 5 minutes for 95 hours, and QuickTime Player on Mac was
223 used to create a time lapse video at 29.97 frames per second from the ensuing image stack.

224

225 **Bean growth and imaging:**

226 Two clear 5.15' x 4.38" x 1.5" plexiglass planters (fabricated using a laser cutter) were filled
227 with Miracle Gro® indoor potting mix soil, and two varieties of the common bean *Phaseolus*
228 *vulgaris* were planted on the edge of each planter such that they were visible from one side. The
229 design of the relatively thin planters optimized root visibility, but other options can also work.

230 The planters were watered immediately after the beans were planted, and again whenever the soil
231 appeared visibly dry. Using the PiSpy, images were recorded every 5 minutes for 11 days, and
232 QuickTime Player on Mac was used to create a time lapse video at 29.97 frames per second from
233 the ensuing image stack.

234

235 **Drosophila larvae locomotion:**

236 10 third instar *D. melanogaster* larvae were placed on an agar plate. A filter paper disc was
237 placed in the center and undiluted apple cider vinegar was applied onto the disc to attract the
238 larvae. Using the PiSpy, a 5-minute video was recorded. Subsequently, the MTrackJ plugin for
239 ImageJ was used to analyze the movement of the larvae by manually annotating the location of
240 the anterior side of the larvae in every frame of an image stack generated by taking 1 frame from
241 each second of the video[17].

242

243

244 **Crayfish observation:**

245 Two crayfish, one *Orconectes rusticus* and one *Procambarus clarkii* were placed together in a
246 clear plastic container. The PiSpy was used to record a video of their interaction for 30 seconds.

247

248 **Ant observation:**

249 Five *Harpegnathos saltator* ants were isolated from an established colony and placed in a new
250 nest box. The PiSpy was used to record 30 second videos every 20 minutes for 3 days.

251

252 For the motion triggered setup, a large ant nest box was connected to a smaller foraging arena by
253 a tube. An IR break beam motion sensor connected to the PiSpy and held secure by a custom-
254 built LEGO® structure was placed such that it would be triggered when an ant passed through
255 the connecting tube. Crickets were placed in the foraging arena, and the PiSpy was set to input
256 trigger mode, recording 15 second videos when the break beam was triggered with a delay of 5
257 seconds after video acquisition.

258

259 Author Contributions:

260 BIM: Conceptualization, Software, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources,
261 Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review
262 & Editing

263 MJK: Conceptualization, Software, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources,
264 Supervision, Validation, Visualization

265 BC: Conceptualization, Software, Investigation, Validation

266 OM: Methodology, Resources

267 AMC: Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing

268 ML: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision

269 TT: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources

270 GMP: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project
271 Administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing

272

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281 of experimental apparatuses and Andrea Vaccari for assistance in GUI coding. We would also
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284 Electrical and Computer Engineering Departments at Bucknell University for fabrication
285 support.

286

287 Figure Legends:

288 **Fig. 1: Overview of the PiSpy**

289 **A.** Base model of the PiSpy, with optional LED lightboard and PIR motion sensor attached. **B.**
290 Back of PiSpy highlighting 3D printed computer mount. **C.** 3D printed ball and socket camera
291 joint, which allows for free rotation of the camera. **D.** Screenshot of the PiSpy GUI, which
292 controls basic recording settings.

293

294 **Fig. 2: Video and time lapse image recording**

295 **A.** Image of 10 *D. melanogaster* larvae initial position (left) and tracking data, with the number
296 denoting that larva's final position relative to central apple cider vinegar bait (right) (S1 Video).
297 **B.** Image still of recording of crayfish dueling behavior. Two crayfish, one *Orconectes rusticus*
298 and one *Procambarus clarkii* were placed in a container and the PiSpy was used to record their
299 interaction for thirty seconds (S2 Video). **C.** Representative images from a time lapse video of
300 *Phaseolus vulgaris* bean growing in clear planters and imaged by the PiSpy every 5 minutes (S3
301 Video). **D.** Representative images from a time lapse video (S4 Video) of *Bacillus mycoides*
302 bacteria growing on a TSA+G agar plate and imaged by the PiSpy every 5 minutes (S4 Video).

303

304 **Fig. 3: Monitoring *Harpegnathos saltator* ant behavior.**

305 **A.** Custom designed PiSpy setup for ant behavioral recording. The inset PCB boards provide
306 LED lighting that cycles between red and white as specified by the user. **B.** Sample image from a
307 video (S5 Video) of an *H. saltator* colony recorded during the day with white lighting from the
308 PiSpy LED PCBs. **C.** Sample image from a video (S6 Video) of an *H. saltator* colony recorded
309 during the night, with red lighting from the PiSpy LED PCBs. **D.** Multi-PiSpy setup using a
310 KVM switch to control all four PiSpy units with a single monitor, keyboard, and mouse. **E.**
311 Sample image still from the recording of *H. saltator* feeding. An IR break beam connected to the
312 PiSpy was placed such that it would be triggered when an ant crossed a tube connecting a nest
313 box to a foraging arena, and the PiSpy was used to record ants going to the arena and returning
314 carrying crickets (S7 Video).

315

316 **Supporting information**

317

318 **S1 Table. Bill of Materials**

319 List, costs, and suggested links for all required parts to build the PiSpy, as well as optional
320 additional equipment. For assembly and setup instructions, refer to the user's guide (link once
321 uploaded).

322 (XLSX)

323

324 **S1 Video. *Drosophila* larval tracking with MTrackJ on ImageJ (related to Fig. 2A).**

325 (MOV)

326

327 **S2 Video. Crayfish dueling behavior (related to Fig. 2B).**

328 (MOV)

329

330 **S3 Video. Timelapse video of *Phaseolus vulgaris* bean growth (related to Fig. 2C).**

331 (MOV)

332

333 **S4 Video. Timelapse video of *Bacillus mycoides* colony growth (related to Fig. 2D).**

334 (MOV)

335

336 **S5 Video. Daytime recording of *Harpegnathos saltator* behavior (related to Fig. 3B).**

337 (MOV)

338

339 **S6 Video. Nighttime recording of *Harpegnathos saltator* behavior (related to Fig. 3C).**

340 (MOV)

341

342 **S7 Video. Break beam triggered video of *Harpegnathos saltator* foraging behavior (related
343 to Fig. 3D).**

344 (MOV)

345

346

347 References:

348

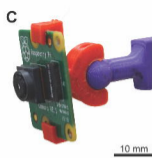
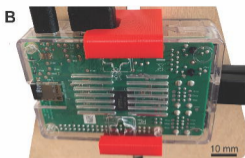
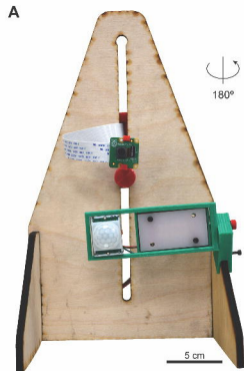
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D

Flpy Control

Video Capture Mode

Video Clip Length: (mm:ss)

Frame Rate: (fps)

Duration: (hour)

Timed

Video Frequency: every (frames)

Input Trigger

Input: GPIO# (BCM)

Delay: (mm:ss)

Image Capture Mode

Duration: (hour)

Timed

Image Frequency: every (frames)

Input Trigger

Input: GPIO# (BCM)

Delay: (mm:ss)

Select Camera Resolution:

- 1920x1080
- 1280x720
- 3280x2464
- 1280x720
- 1920x1080
- 640x480

Light Control

Light Start Times: (Minutes)

White LED ON: (Minutes)

Red LED ON: (Minutes)

Light Stop Times: (Minutes)

White LED OFF: (Minutes)

Red LED OFF: (Minutes)

Red Light On

White Light On

Lights Off

Preview Camera

Preview Length: (seconds)

Quick Capture

Run Program

