

## Spikeling: A low-cost hardware implementation of a spiking neuron for neuroscience teaching and outreach

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1           **Spikeling: a low-cost hardware implementation of a spiking neuron for**  
2                                   **neuroscience teaching and outreach**

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11  
12          **Summary**

13          Understanding of how neurons encode and compute information is fundamental to  
14          our study of the brain, but opportunities for hands-on experience with  
15          neurophysiological techniques on live neurons are scarce in science education.  
16          Here, we present Spikeling, an open source in silico implementation of a spiking  
17          neuron that costs £25 and mimics a wide range of neuronal behaviours for  
18          classroom education and public neuroscience outreach. Spikeling is based on an  
19          Arduino microcontroller running the computationally efficient Izhikevich model of a  
20          spiking neuron. The microcontroller is connected to input ports that simulate  
21          synaptic excitation or inhibition, dials controlling current injection and noise levels, a  
22          photodiode that makes Spikeling light-sensitive and an LED and speaker that allows  
23          spikes to be seen and heard. Output ports provide access to variables such as

24 membrane potential for recording in experiments or digital signals that can be used  
25 to excite other connected Spikelings. These features allow for the intuitive  
26 exploration of the function of neurons and networks mimicking electrophysiological  
27 experiments. We also report our experience of using Spikeling as a teaching tool for  
28 undergraduate and graduate neuroscience education in Nigeria and the UK.

29

## 30 **Introduction**

31 Neuroscience is a major arm of modern life sciences. The first neuroscience degrees  
32 were awarded by the University of Sussex in 1972 and many universities worldwide  
33 are now offering dedicated neuroscience undergraduate degrees [1], [2]. A  
34 fundamental aspect of these courses is understanding electrical signalling within  
35 neurons and the transmission of signals across synapses [3], as well as the  
36 experimental techniques necessary to observe these properties [4]. However, owing  
37 to budgetary constraints and logistical hurdles, few students can be afforded the  
38 opportunity to experience an electrophysiological recording of a living neuron in  
39 action, for example during an experimental class. Similarly, public understanding  
40 about the fundamentals of brain function is hampered by the lack of cheap,  
41 approachable and easy-to-use tools for neuroscience outreach aimed at illuminating  
42 how the basic machines of the brain, neurons and synapses, operate to represent  
43 information [5]. The growing public interest in areas such as artificial intelligence and  
44 the effects of neurodegeneration on an aging population make it more pressing than  
45 ever to foster public awareness and interest in basic concepts in neuroscience [6].

46 To support university level neuroscience teaching and public understanding of  
47 neurons, we designed “Spikeling” (Fig. 1A), a £25 electronic circuit that mimics the  
48 electrical properties of a spiking neurons by running the computationally efficient yet  
49 versatile Izhikevich model [7] in realtime. Depending on settings, Spikeling executes  
50 at ~420-1,000 Hz, which is particularly appropriate to mimic “slow” neurons of many  
51 invertebrates, but about an order of magnitude slower than the fastest cortical  
52 neurons of mammals. The circuit is built around an Arduino [8], an open source  
53 programmable microcontroller that has found widespread use in the teaching of

54 engineering and the design and implementation of open source laboratory hardware  
55 [9], [10].

56

57 **Figure 1 | Basic hardware and software. A**, Fully assembled Spikeling board. **B**,  
58 Screenshots of the Serial Oscilloscope software used displaying Spikeling activity of  
59 the network in (C). **C**, Three Spikelings connected into a simple network.

60

61 Following the footsteps of Mahowald and Douglas' 1991 first complete *in silico*  
62 realisation of a spiking neuron [11], Spikeling presents a simple yet powerful model  
63 of an excitable neuron with multiple dials and input/output options to play with. It is  
64 designed to facilitate a hands-on and intuitive approach to exploring the biophysics  
65 of neurons, their operation within neuronal networks and the strategies by which they  
66 encode and process information. Spikeling can be excited and its activity recorded  
67 so as to design a variety of classical experiments similar to those that might be  
68 carried out on a biological neuron and which students learn about in textbooks [12],  
69 [13]. Here, we present a series of basic neuronal processes that are efficiently  
70 modelled using Spikeling, followed by an evaluation of our experience using the  
71 device for teaching senior undergraduate and MSc students in the UK and a  
72 graduate neuroscience summer school held in Nigeria. Spikeling should be a useful  
73 tool in educating students of neuroscience and psychology, as well as students of  
74 engineering and computer science who are interested in the biophysics of neurons  
75 and brain function.

76

77

78 **MAIN**

79 **A simple hardware implementation of a spiking neuron**

80 Spikeling (Fig 1) consists of an Arduino-Nano microcontroller, a custom-printed  
81 circuit board, and a small number of standard electronic components (see Bill of  
82 Materials, BOM). Assembly takes between 20 minutes and 2 hours, depending on  
83 previous experience with soldering and assembling circuit boards (see Spikeling  
84 manual). Spikeling features large contacts and ample component spacing to facilitate  
85 soldering for beginners. The functional properties of Spikeling can be modified by  
86 software within the Arduino integrated development environment (IDE).

87 Upon current injection, Spikeling begins to fire, with each spike translating into an  
88 audible “click” from a speaker. In tandem, membrane potential is continuously  
89 tracked by the brightness of a light-emitting-diode (LED). To mimic different types of  
90 neurons, Spikeling features a “mode button” for switching between different pre-  
91 programmed model behaviours (e.g. regular spiking, fast spiking, bursting etc.).  
92 These can also be modified in the code provided.

93 For inputs, Spikeling (Fig 1A, S1 Fig) has three Bayonet Neill-Concelman (BNC)  
94 ports: Two are “input synapses” that each respond to 5V transistor-transistor-logic  
95 (TTL) pulses (ports 1,2) such as the “spike output” of a second unit. Thus,  
96 Spikelings can also be connected into simple neuronal networks (Fig 1B, C). A third  
97 BNC input connection (port 3) is an analog-in port that can be driven with a stand-  
98 alone stimulus generator or by a computer with a suitable output port. The gain and  
99 sign of all inputs can be continuously set with rotary encoder knobs (dials 1 & 2 –  
100 with dial 2 controlling both analog-in and synapse 2 gain). One aim in the design of  
101 Spikeling was to also teach how neurons encode a sensory stimulus so an on-board

102 photodiode allows Spikeling to sense light. A light stimulus can be delivered  
103 externally (e.g. using a torch), or via an LED driven by a programmable on-board  
104 pulse generator. To mimic the “noisiness” of biological neurons in intact neural  
105 circuits, a knob is provided to add variable amounts of membrane noise to the  
106 simulation (dial 3) while a final knob controls a static input current to set resting  
107 membrane voltage (dial 4).

108 For outputs, Spikeling features digital (port 4) and analog (port 5) BNC connections  
109 that can be used to visualise the “membrane voltage” output on an external  
110 oscilloscope or to drive another Spikeling. Alternatively, the modelled membrane  
111 potential and several key internal processes (e.g. different current sources, input  
112 spikes etc.) can be read out directly through the USB-based serial port into a  
113 computer for data logging and live display on a monitor (Fig 1B). We also provide  
114 Python (as Jupyter Notebook) and Matlab (Mathworks) scripts for basic data  
115 visualisation and analysis. Finally, the system can be powered through the universal  
116 serial bus (USB) port or by a 9V battery.

117

### 118 **Simulating neuronal activity**

119 In an informal setting, Spikeling can be explored in a playful manner simply by (i)  
120 depolarising or hyperpolarising the neuron via the input current (dial 4), (ii) dialling up  
121 the membrane noise (dial 3, Fig 2A) or (iii) manual stimulation of the photodiode with  
122 a torch (Fig 2B, SVideo 1). In each case, elicited spike activity can be intuitively  
123 tracked by audible clicks coupled to flashes of the onboard LED. In parallel,  
124 membrane potential and input current can be tracked live on a PC screen through a  
125 serial plotter such as the openly available “Serial oscilloscope” [14] (Fig 1B). In this

126 setup, Spikeling can be used to explore basic concepts in neuronal coding. For  
127 example, holding a torch over the photodiode initially elicits a burst of spikes that  
128 gradually slows down if the light is held in place, thereby mimicking a slowly adapting  
129 “light-on” responsive neuron (Fig 2B, left). The same experiment with Spikeling set to  
130 mode 2 (toggled via the onboard button) will reveal a rapidly adapting rebound burst  
131 of spikes upon removing the light, thereby mimicking a transient light-off responsive  
132 neuron (Fig 2B, center). Next, mode 3 mimics a sustained light-off driven neuron with  
133 an elevated basal spike rate (Fig 2B, right, cf. SVideo 2). In total, Spikeling is pre-  
134 programmed with 5 modes (S2 Fig). These can easily be modified or extended by  
135 the user in the Arduino code provided.

136

137 **Figure 2 | Manual exploration of Spikeling functions. A**, Example recording of  
138 Spikeling membrane potential (top) and current (bottom) during manual  
139 manipulations of the input current dial (4) to depolarise the neuron (left) and following  
140 the addition of a noise current (dial 3, right). **B**, Example light responses in modes 1-  
141 3 (left to right, toggled by the button) to manual photodiode (PD) stimulation with a  
142 torch. The grey horizontal lines indicate  $I_{\text{total}} = 0$ .

143

144 For more formal experimentation, Spikeling can be driven in a temporally precise  
145 manner via the analog-in port or a regularly pulsed light source mounted over the  
146 photodiode (SVideo 3). As a stimulus, port 1 (synapse 1/ stimulus out) can be flexibly  
147 reconfigured into a digital stimulus generator. Alternatively, an external 0-5V analog  
148 stimulus generator can be connected (not shown). At default settings, this port will  
149 continuously generate 0-5 V pulses at 50% duty cycle, with the stimulation rate being



150 controlled through dial 1. Accordingly, simply connecting port 1 (stimulus out) to port  
151 3 (analog-in) allows for temporally precise stimulation of the model neuron.

152 The millisecond precision achieved in this way can then be exploited to study  
153 neuronal function in further detail. For example, at default settings (see Spikeling  
154 manual) the stimulator directly coupled to the analog-in port drives a highly  
155 stereotyped spike train upon repeated stimulation (Fig 3A, left), as further elaborated  
156 in the raster plot (Fig 3A, right, see also S2 Fig). From here, systematic variation of  
157 the analog-in gain (dial 2) can be used to drive Spikeling with different amplitude  
158 current steps, for example to build amplitude tuning functions for spike rate, latency  
159 or first-spike time-precision (Fig 3B).

160

161 **Figure 3 | Basic stimulus-driven functions. A**, Example recording of Spikeling in  
162 Mode 1 driven by the internal stimulator (port 1) via the Analog In connector (port 3)  
163 as indicated. Gain and stimulus rate are controlled on dials 2 and 1, respectively.  
164 Right: stimulus aligned response segments (grey) and average (black) as well as  
165 spike raster plot. **B**, as (A, right), with varying input gain to probe amplitude tuning.  
166 Note systematic effects on spike number, rate, time latency and time precision. **C**, As  
167 (A), but this time driving Spikeling via an LED attached to the stimulus port  
168 stimulating the photodiode. Note different waveforms of input current and  
169 consequences on the elicited spike pattern compared to (A). **D**, as (C), with addition  
170 of current noise (dial 3). Note distortion of spike timings, while the number of spike  
171 triggered remains approximately constant.

172

173 Next, rather than delivering port 1's square-pulse drive via analog-in, the user can  
174 instead drive an LED from the same port. In this way, positioning the LED above the  
175 photodiode (e.g. via the 3D-printable adapter provided, or a custom paper tube)  
176 allows for temporally precise driving of Spikeling via light (Fig 3C). Adding noise to  
177 this simulation allows exploring how the addition of noise initially distorts spike  
178 timings before affecting rates (Fig 3D).

179 Similarly, the experimenter could vary the rate of stimulation to probe the intrinsic  
180 frequency tuning of a neuron (dial 1, not shown). At faster stimulus rates, Spikeling  
181 can be set to occasionally "miss" individual current steps and instead adopt a volley  
182 code [15] for event timing (Fig 4A). In this configuration, Spikeling continues to  
183 phase-lock to the stimulus, as summarised in the event-aligned plot to the right. Note  
184 that even though spikes frequently fail, the subthreshold potential continues to  
185 reliably track the stimulus. From here, the static input current (dial 4) and noise (dial  
186 3) can be tweaked to put the system into stochastic resonance [16], [17]: In this  
187 situation, counterintuitively, the addition of noise is beneficial to the code (Fig 4B). In  
188 the example shown, the "generator potential" (the noise-free stimulus driven  
189 membrane voltage fluctuations) is itself insufficient to elicit any spikes. As a result,  
190 the neuron fails to encode the stimulus at the level of its spike output (Fig 4B, left).  
191 Addition of noise occasionally takes the membrane potential above spike threshold  
192 (Fig 4B, middle) and the probability of this threshold crossing is higher during a  
193 depolarising phase of the generator. As a result, the system now elicit spikes which,  
194 depending on the noise level chosen, reliably phase-lock to the stimulus (Fig 4B,  
195 right). Such stochastic resonance can be used e.g. by sensory systems to deal with  
196 noisy inputs – summing across the spike output from many such resonating neurons  
197 can then reconstruct the original stimulus with high fidelity [18], [19].

198 **Figure 4 | Volley coding and stochastic resonance. A**, By varying the stimulus  
199 rate, Spikelings can be set-up to “miss” individual stimulus cycles at the level of the  
200 spike output (left). However, when elicited, spikes remain phase-locked to the  
201 stimulus (right). **B**, Example of stochastic resonance: as (A), with neuron  
202 hyperpolarised just enough to prevent all spikes (left). Now, addition of membrane  
203 noise occasionally elicits spikes (middle), which again are phase-locked to the  
204 stimulus (right). Dotted line indicates approximate spike threshold.

205

206 Next, two or more Spikelings can be connected into a network via BNC cables  
207 (SVideo 4). For this, the digital-out connector (port 4) of one unit is connected to one  
208 of two “synapse-in” connectors (e.g. port 2) on another unit. Synaptic gain can then  
209 be controlled using a rotary encoder (here: dial 2) to vary the efficacy and sign of the  
210 coupling, thus mimicking excitatory or inhibitory connections (Fig 5A). Two  
211 reciprocally connected units can then be used to set up a basic central pattern  
212 generator [20], [21] (Fig 5B).

213

214 **Figure 5 | Synaptic Networks. A**, Two or more Spikelings can be connected to form  
215 synaptic connections, as indicated. Left: Excitatory synaptic connection with synaptic  
216 gain gradually increased by hand over time (dial 2). Right: Inhibitory connection at  
217 two different depolarisation states (dial 4). **B**, Example of a 2-neuron central pattern  
218 generator (CPG). The two Spikelings are set to mode 2 and wired to mutually excite  
219 each other. In each case, all traces display the activity and incoming spikes of the  
220 top-most Spikelings.

221

222 Spikeling can also be used to explore neuronal function more systematically, for  
223 example by estimating the linear filter that underlies its photo-response in a given  
224 mode [22]. This is a fundamental approach in computational and sensory  
225 neuroscience, and the calculation of the linear filter is based on recording a neuron's  
226 response to a "noise stimulus" for several minutes. Subsequent reverse correlation  
227 of the elicited spike- or subthreshold activity against the original stimulus then allows  
228 calculating the average stimulus that drove a response in the neuron: the linear filter,  
229 sometimes also referred to as "time-reversed impulse response" or "response  
230 kernel". Reverse correlation to spikes is the more common calculation, when the  
231 linear filter is also termed the "spike-triggered average" or STA [23]. To explore this  
232 concept, Spikeling's stimulus port (1) can be set to generate binary noise at a  
233 chosen frequency via a flag in the Arduino code (see Spikeling manual). In this  
234 configuration, the photodiode can be stimulated by this noise stimulus via an LED as  
235 before (Fig 6A, cf. Fig 3C), thereby driving spikes and subthreshold oscillations. The  
236 linear filters of a mode 1 Spikeling ("slow") reveal a clear biphasic (band pass)  
237 stimulus dependence at the level of spikes, but a monophasic dependence (low  
238 pass) at the level of subthreshold activity (Fig 6B, black). In comparison, the same  
239 mode 1 neuron retuned to use a rapidly adapting photodiode-driven current ("fast")  
240 gives a triphasic stimulus dependence at the level of spikes and a biphasic  
241 dependence at the level of the subthreshold generator (Fig 6B, red).

242

243 **Figure 6 | Estimating linear filters by reverse correlation. A,** Via the Arduino  
244 code, the stimulus port can be set to deliver 50 Hz binary noise, here used to drive  
245 the photodiode via an LED (cf. Fig 3C). Current and spike pattern elicited by this  
246 stimulus. **B,** linear filters of a slow (black) and a fast (red) photo-adapting mode 1

247 neuron estimated at the level of spikes (left) and subthreshold membrane potential  
248 (right).

249

250 Taken together, Spikeling can be used in a variety of classroom and demonstration  
251 scenarios, ranging from simple observations of changes in spike rates upon  
252 stimulation to advanced concepts in neuronal computation and analysis.

253 An example set of Spikeling-based classroom exercises is provided (see Spikeling  
254 manual). From here, advanced users can easily re-programme the Arduino code to  
255 implement or fine tune further functionalities as required. The entire project, including  
256 all code, hardware design, bill of materials and detailed build instructions are  
257 available online for anyone to freely view and modify  
258 (<https://github.com/BadenLab/Spikeling> and <https://badenlab.org/resources/>).

259

## 260 **Spikeling in the classroom**

261 We evaluated the utility of Spikeling in two classroom scenarios: (i) as a 2-day  
262 section within a 3-week intensive neuroscience summer school held at Gombe State  
263 University, Nigeria by TReND in Africa [24] and (ii) as part of an 18-lecture module  
264 on “*Sensory function and computation*” delivered to 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate and MSc  
265 neuroscience students at the University of Sussex, UK. We report on each  
266 experience in turn.

267 At Gombe State University, Nigeria, we ran two identical 2-day sessions for a total of  
268 18 Africa-based biomedical graduate students (9 at a time) as part of the 7<sup>th</sup>  
269 TReND/ISN school on Insect Neuroscience and *Drosophila* Neurogenetics [24].

270 None of the students had much experience with neuronal computation or  
271 electrophysiological techniques, although most had covered basic concepts in  
272 neuroscience such as action potential generation in their undergraduate degrees.  
273 We introduced Spikeling in three steps. First, we held a 1-hour lecture where a single  
274 Spikeling was connected to a computer with the serial oscilloscope output being  
275 projected live to the wall. In parallel, a whiteboard was used for explanations and  
276 discussions. From here, we combined a general explanation of concepts in neuronal  
277 computation on the board (for example, rate- versus time-coding, sub-threshold  
278 integration, phase-locking etc.) and then demonstrated each phenomenon in front of  
279 the class using Spikeling. Based on feedback after the class, this was perceived as a  
280 very engaging and effective method for introducing concepts in neuronal coding.  
281 Next, we moved on to assembling Spikelings from bags of pre-compiled parts (Fig  
282 7A,B). For this, every student was provided with the printed circuit board, the  
283 electronic components and a soldering iron and taken through the assembly process  
284 by two instructors. After 2-3 hours, every student had successfully assembled a  
285 working unit, despite most not having had any experience with soldering or electronic  
286 circuit logic. In a third step, each student was then provided with the serial  
287 oscilloscope software as well as the exercise document and asked to sequentially  
288 work through a set of pre-designed exercises (Fig 7C,D, see Spikeling manual) in  
289 their own time, with faculty being available to help as required. Following the course,  
290 all students kept their Spikeling to facilitate their own teaching at their host  
291 institutions in 7 different African countries (Nigeria, Malawi, Sudan, Egypt, Kenya,  
292 Zambia, Burkina Faso).

293

294 **Figure 7 | Spikeling in the classroom.** **A**, “Bag of parts” disassembled Spikeling as  
295 used in our summer school in Gombe, Nigeria. **B**, Students soldering Spikelings as  
296 part of an in-class exercise on do-it-yourself equipment building. **C,D**, students  
297 exploring Spikeling functions based on an exercise sheet provided (see Spikeling  
298 manual). **E,F**, in class use of Spikeling as part of a computer lab for 3<sup>rd</sup> year  
299 Neuroscience undergraduates at the University of Sussex, UK.

300

301 At the University of Sussex, UK, we introduced pre-assembled Spikelings as part of  
302 3 sets of 3-hour workshops provided to students in groups of 13. For this, we used a  
303 PC lab where each student had their own Spikeling and PC with Arduino, Serial  
304 Oscilloscope and Matlab preinstalled (Fig 7E,F). The first session began with a 20  
305 minute presentation of basic concepts in neuronal modelling and electronics followed  
306 by a conceptual comparison between the biophysically realistic yet computationally  
307 heavy Hodgkin Huxley model [25], [26] and the much lighter phenomenological  
308 Izhikevich model [7] implemented in Spikeling. Next, we projected the serial  
309 oscilloscope screen of one Spikeling connected to the lecturer’s laptop to the wall.  
310 This allowed easy, live demonstrations of some Spikeling functions, such as the  
311 photo-response or the use of different modes. From here, we asked students to  
312 connect and set up their own units on their PCs and to start exploring “how to best  
313 drive spikes” using their mobile phone torches. Students quickly realised that simply  
314 holding the light above the photodiode ceases to be effective after a few hundred  
315 milliseconds, while repeatedly moving the light over the photodiode reliably elicits  
316 bursts of spikes. In this way, students could intuitively explore basic concepts in time  
317 coding.

318 Afterwards, we brought everyone back to the same page by demonstrating these key  
319 ideas on the Spikeling output projected onto the wall. We then showed students how  
320 to use the stimulator, what the dials do, and how to log data on the serial  
321 oscilloscope. We also showed them how to load and display their data using pre-  
322 written Matlab routines (see Supplementary Materials, which also provides  
323 analogous Python routines). From this point, we asked students to carry out their first  
324 “experiment” quantifying a neuron’s tuning using two measures of response  
325 amplitude, instantaneous spike rate and first-spike latency. These two tuning curves  
326 were compared, again followed by an in-class demonstration and discussion. In this  
327 way, we moved through the majority of Spikeling functions described in this paper  
328 over the course of 3 workshops.

329 Taken together, Spikeling allowed students to explore a number of fundamental  
330 aspects in sensory neuroscience, including analog and digital coding, detection of  
331 signals above noise, the functional consequences of adaptation, and the variety of  
332 temporal filters that neurons implement. The concepts acquired, as tested with take-  
333 home problem sets, dovetailed with lecture content covering rate and time coding,  
334 feature selectivity and tuning diversity, and adaptation. Students reported that the  
335 Spikeling work helped them to develop a more intuitive grasp of these central ideas  
336 in sensory and systems neuroscience.

337

## 338 **Discussion**

339 With modern systems neuroscience increasingly moving into the area of big data  
340 where the activity of 1,000s of neurons can be routinely recorded across a wide  
341 range of neuronal circuits [27]–[33], a deep understanding of how neurons encode



342 and compute information is fundamental. These concepts need to be taught not just  
343 to students of the biological sciences but also to students of psychology as well as  
344 engineers and computer scientists interested in theoretical and computational  
345 neuroscience, artificial intelligence and robotics [4]. However, concepts in neuronal  
346 coding and computation can be unintuitive to grasp or “dry” in lectures, while  
347 classroom electrophysiology on live biological specimens can be technically  
348 challenging and costly to set up [3]. As a result, many students in these disciplines  
349 graduate without ever having had the opportunity to experience and control neuronal  
350 activity in hands-on experiments. Indeed, in many parts of the world, systems  
351 neuroscience is only a rather peripheral aspect of neuroscience curricula, if present  
352 at all, while the cross-over of neuroscience into engineering and informatics often  
353 jumps immediately into discussions of networks based on units that are greatly  
354 simplified versions of biological neurons.

355 Spikeling is intended to help ameliorate some of these issues by allowing students to  
356 carry out experiments in the same general fashion as classical electrophysiologists  
357 but without the amplifiers, filters, manipulators, stimulus generators and other  
358 equipment normally required. Its low cost makes it widely affordable, and once  
359 assembled, it can be used for teaching for many years without additional investment.  
360 It should also be immediately approachable to students of engineering and  
361 informatics who can explore the electrical properties of neurons and the code used  
362 to model these as well as carry out experiments illustrating basic concepts in  
363 theoretical and computational neuroscience [23]. By allowing students to interact  
364 physically with the device, e.g. by providing actual sensory inputs, Spikeling can help  
365 build an intuitive grasp of neuronal computations beyond that provided by pure  
366 computer simulation of neurons.

367 Other recent efforts have also recognised the need for more intuitive hardware  
368 models of spiking neurons, most notably the Neurotinker initiative [34] who release  
369 NeuroBytes. These come in a variety of neuron types, such as photoreceptors or  
370 motoneurons and run a simple integrate-and-fire type model. Generally, NeuroBytes  
371 are designed to be very easy to use and to be connected in larger networks to teach  
372 neuronal control logic to children in a playful manner, albeit at the trade-off of giving  
373 less user control over model behaviour and data-logging. In contrast, Spikeling is  
374 perhaps more suitable for undergraduate-level neuroscience education. Another  
375 initiative aiming to build microcontroller-based neurons is Spikee [35]. Finally, others  
376 have implemented the Izhikevich model on more powerful processors such as a  
377 Programmable-Intelligent-Computer-32 (PIC32) [36] or a Field-programmable gate  
378 array (FPGA) [37], however these more expensive and complex implementations  
379 are, at least currently, more aimed at professionals in computing and electronic  
380 engineering and do not come with a dedicated lay-user-friendly interface.  
381 Notwithstanding, there are already many software-only implementations of neuron  
382 models available online for both research and teaching, including several that are  
383 free and open source. For example, NEURON [38] is a popular high-end neuron  
384 simulator environment used primarily in research, while SNNAP [39] and  
385 MetaNeuron [40] are but two of many examples of educational options.

386 With time, we hope that others may take up our basic design and build upon it, for  
387 example by providing inputs to other sensory modalities such as touch or sound or  
388 by changing the Arduino code to implement new functions or simulate neurons with  
389 different tuning properties. Spikeling could also be used as a “test-neuron” in  
390 conjunction with existing electrophysiological equipment, for example to quickly  
391 verify stimulus protocols or as a stimulus generator.

392 Another point for future improvements is the model refresh rate. In the current  
393 “standard” set-up with all options enabled, the model runs at ~420 Hz. While this is  
394 easily sufficient to model basic conceptual processes of neuronal function, it is  
395 slower than what might be expected from e.g. a mammalian cortical neuron and  
396 instead rather resembles neurons of cold-blooded species. If desired, we elaborate  
397 how the user can trade-off model complexity for speed (see Spikeling manual).

398 Notably, we are currently working on a version Spikeling 2.0, which uses the more  
399 powerful and WiFi-capable ESP8266 instead of the Arduino Nano. This version can  
400 either execute the model at about five to ten times the speed of the version  
401 presented here, or alternatively drive a standalone colour TFT screen at  
402 approximately the same speed at the Arduino Nano (without screen). For Spikeling  
403 2.0, please refer to the GitHub which is updated on an ongoing basis.

404 Spikeling is available on a share-alike open license, prompting any modifications of  
405 the original code to be freely distributed for everyone to use. We aim to keep these  
406 efforts centralised on the Spikeling GitHub (<https://github.com/BadenLab/Spikeling>),  
407 or link to new repositories as they arise to gradually build a community of users and  
408 contributors. For convenience, we also set-up a simplified component sourcing  
409 option Kitspace at <https://kitspace.org/boards/github.com/badenlab/spikeling/>.

410

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419

420 **Author contributions**

421 TB conceived of, designed and implemented Spikeling. TE implemented Spikeling  
422 2.0. Python pre-processing scripts were written by TB with help from DG and PB,  
423 and Matlab pre-processing scripts were written by BJ with modifications by TB.  
424 Spikelings for UK teaching were assembled and tested by MYZ, PB and DG. All  
425 authors contributed to in-class teaching and evaluation in the UK. TB taught the  
426 course in Nigeria. The paper was written by TB with help from LL and MM and inputs  
427 from all authors.

428

429 **Data availability**

430 All Hardware instructions, code, manuals and example data are freely available at:  
431 <https://github.com/BadenLab/Spikeling> and <https://badenlab.org/resources/>.

432

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524

525 **Supplementary Materials**

526 **Figure S1 | Circuit and PCB layout.** **A**, Wiring diagram of Spikeling. **B**, PCB  
527 Layout.

528 **Figure S2 | Mode Overview.** **A,B**, All 5 pre-programmed Spikeling modes  
529 responding to current (A) and light steps (B). Additional modes can be easily added  
530 in the Arduino code (see Spikeling manual).

531

532 **Video S1: Basic functions**

533 **Video S2: Modes**

534 **Video S3: Stimulus generator**

535 **Video S4: Synaptic Networks**

536

537 **Supplementary data files provided:**

- 538 - Spikeling Manual including assembly and example exercises
- 539 - Bill of Materials (BOM)
- 540 - PCB layout files (Eagle)
- 541 - Arduino code for Spikeling
- 542 - Matlab (x2) and Python code for basic data analysis and visualisation
- 543 - OpenSCAD and surface-tessilation (stl) files for 3D-printable LED-mounting  
544 adapter
- 545 - Example logged data (csv)