

SCIENCE FICTION TO SCIENCE FACT

CHILDHOOD ASPIRATIONS AND DREAMS

often shape who we are and what we become. Some dream of cheering crowds as they slide into home plate, others imagine themselves saving lives or writing a bestseller. For senior Alexander Endert, a computer science major and research assistant for the robotics research program, the beginning of his lifelong interest began more innocuously: “When

I was little and playing with Legos,” he notes, “I was fascinated with getting a machine to do things for you.”

In May 2007, Endert, along with Isaac Green, assistant professor of computer science, began research on autonomous robots: machines that can navigate and map their way around a region without any interaction from humans. This project has great potential both for artificial

intelligence and advanced mapping of regions currently inaccessible to humans.

“The robot is controlled through a single-board computer running a small footprint linux build,” Endert explains. “The testing we have conducted has been in a controlled indoor environment, such as the hallways of the J.C. Long Building. So far, we are pleased with our results, as well as our progress, and I feel the project will continue even after I graduate.”

For Endert, this is just the beginning. Even as he lays the foundation for future students to continue his research, he’s preparing for graduate work at Virginia Tech this fall. There, he will continue his work in robotics by helping the school’s DARPA Urban Challenge Team. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA – the Department of Defense’s research branch – has asked teams across the country to create a robot that can autonomously navigate urban environments.

“Working on a project funded by the Department of Defense and at a prestigious graduate program,” Endert laughs, “not too bad for a kid who got his start playing with Legos.”

– Nick Porter '07



| Photo by Alice Keeny '04 |