

How Do We Preserve Robots? Preserving Complex STEM Collections Through Outreach, Advocacy, and Interdisciplinary Methods at Carnegie Mellon University

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At Carnegie Mellon University, archivists face an unusual question: how do we preserve robots? Known informally as “Robot U,” Carnegie Mellon has a well-established reputation as a hub for robotics research. In 1979, the University established the Robotics Institute, the first robotics department in the country. In the past 40 years, it has become a prominent part of the campus environment and culture, influencing its academic and research programs as well as its global reputation. CMU has produced innovations in everything from the first outdoor self-driving vehicles to snack delivery robots. Any history of the University and robotics would be incomplete without an account of these activities. In recognition of this growing legacy, at the end of 2019, our team launched The Robotics Project, an interdisciplinary partnership between the University Libraries and the School of Computer Science to investigate the research ecosystem of robotics, create a model for preserving these records, and document the history of the field. We’re employing a range of outreach and advocacy strategies to build community interest in our work while at the same time combining interdisciplinary methods from GLAM as well as a variety of related fields such as time-based media artwork preservation, anthropology, data management, and conservation. By Fall 2022, we will share our findings in a report presenting a toolkit for preserving complex STEM collections. The toolkit has applications for robotics and other scientific fields defined by collaborative research processes and complex, multi-modal objects and documentation.

About the author:

Katherine Barbera is an Archivist and Oral Historian at Carnegie Mellon University. She is an archivist in the University Archives, founder and director of the CMU Oral History Program, and lead archivist for The Robotics Project. Her work blends archival and public history methods to expand community engagement with archives and archival collections. She serves on the Society of American Archivists’ Committee on Public Awareness and is a co-founder of Three Rivers Archivists, a regional professional advocacy group in Pittsburgh. She holds an M.A. in Public History from Duquesne University.