

Australian first: chat-bot that gets kids reading

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Australia's first chat-bot designed to get kids reading has just been launched at the State Library of NSW.

Scout is a fun, interactive robot that uses a conversational interface which helps children quickly discover books matched to their interests and general reading ability.

"Children are reading as much, if not more than ever. Scout will help them find new books to read," says State Librarian John Vallance.

"Young readers can chat with Scout about what books there are in our new Children's Library. I've tried it myself a few times and it's great fun," says Dr Vallance.

Scout, created by award-winning experience designer Meena Tharmarajah in collaboration with the State Library's DX Lab, assesses a child's interests and reading level before dispensing a list of up to five books they will enjoy reading in The Children's Library.

Meena is the creative force behind the ABC Play School iPad Apps (*The Art Maker* and *Play Time*) and spent a few months working on chat-bot concept at the Library as a DX Lab Digital drop-in. She believes "all digital experiences should be both useful and enjoyable."

"Scout is an experiment in understanding how children might find a book they will love to read. And really the people best equipped to provide insight on what will really work for children are the children themselves," says Meena.

Meena consulted with the Library's Learning team and ran design thinking workshops with Year 5 students from Balgowlah North Public School which helped inform the chat-bot experience, including the physical design.

"We've created a robot-like kiosk with a touchscreen and thermal printer. Young readers are prompted to answer a few simple questions mapped to the collection of 2,000+ books in The Children's Library (from picture books to YA titles). They then receive a printed list of books they liked."

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Meena says Scout is a great tool for librarians and could inform how a collection might be organised, but also the type of books that could be added to a collection.

According to DX Lab Lead Paula Bray, “we’re continuing to look at new and innovative ways for readers and visitors to access and interact with the Library’s extensive collection of books, maps, paintings, photographs, manuscripts, objects and digital content, and Scout is one of the DX Lab’s most exciting and rewarding collaborations.”

Scout is located on the ground floor of the State Library’s Macquarie Street Building. The Children’s Library is located on the floor below in the Governor Marie Bashir Reading Room.

For more information, interviews and publicity images, please contact:
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