Emma the MPL Catbot wins 2011 Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award

By [David Newyear](), Mar 23, 2011 in
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Summary: Mentor Public Library's "Emma" wins the 2011 Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award

[The Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award]() honors the life and accomplishments of John Iliff, early adopter and champion of technology in public libraries. This award provides a $1,000 honorarium to a library professional or library that has used technology and innovation as a tool to improve services to public library users. David Newyear, adult information services manager of the Mentor, Ohio Public Library is receiving the award for the creation of [Emma, the Catbot](), an engaging artificially intelligent cat that engages library users and provides basic reference services.

Mentor Public Library Adult Information Services Manager David Newyear was recently named the 2011 recipient of the Polaris Innovation in Technology John Iliff Award by the

Public Library Association (PLA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA).

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Newyear will receive his award in June at the 2011 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans for his creation of "Emma" the Catbot, an artificially intelligent virtual agent or chatbot that engages library users and provides basic reference services. Targeting both the least and most proficient computer users, Emma offers instruction and assistance to those unfamiliar with the libraries' resources, creating another positive bond with the community

"This is a tremendous honor," Newyear said. "I feel truly humbled by it. The recognition is not only for Emma, but also for Mentor Public Library and our commitment to innovation." Newyear said the idea to create a virtual agent at the Mentor Public Library began in the summer of 2009 when Ohio Governor Ted Strickland made the announcement that he was proposing significant budget cuts to the state library fund.

Public libraries did not know at that time how deep the cuts were going to be, but Newyear immediately began looking for a way to help keep the doors open if the library had to make its own cost-cutting measures.

"I wanted to find a way to maintain information services even in the worst case scenario,

times when the reference desk might be empty. As I watched the self-checkouts being installed, I wondered if we couldn't create something similar to answer questions."

Newyear said Emma allows reference staff to focus on doing reference work, while the Catbot addresses routine in-house questions regarding library policy and service information. Emma can ease the burden of routine questions allowing library staff to make better use of their time.

After Mentor Public Library Friends of the Library sponsored Newyear to acquire the software, "Emma" was created and first presented to the public in Nov. 19, 2009 on the MPL Web site. She is in the image of one of Newyear's cats, a Maine Coon cat his wife rescued from abandonment in a trailer park. The 6-week-old, malnourished kitten was riddled with fleas and very sick. Newyear credits her survival to her strong and smart personality; a fitting namesake he thought to the library's virtual agent. He will, in fact, donate the award money in Emma's honor to an Akron, Ohio-based, no-kill shelter where he obtained three rescued cats for adoption.

Newyear's ultimate goal for Emma is for her to be an integral part of the library, providing assistance on a 24/7 basis. He stated that this technology would not be able to replace person-to-person interaction. It can, however, help fill voids left by budget cuts, enhance navigation of existing resources, provide a marketing tool for reference services, and improve the productivity of the existing staff.

Mentor Public Library Executive Director Lynn Hawkins said as the administration focused on how technology could provide workflow solutions in circulation and cataloging, Newyear

turned his attention to streamlining the work of the reference department.

"When no logical technology solution could be found, David did what any creative thinker would do: He developed one of his own," she said. "It is enormously satisfying to see his hard work on the Catbot being recognized on a wide level, both by his peers and in the private sector. This technology has the potential to help libraries manage a traditional service effectively in the void left by budget cuts, and to increase staff productivity. We love Emma."

Newyear said Emma's success has generated "a lot of interest in the library world."
"I believe this technology has tremendous potential for libraries," he said. "It is needed now more than ever."

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