

Birmingham's household robot a science museum success

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Dora, a domestic robot devised and built by a group of European computer scientists led by the University of Birmingham, featured at the London Science Museum's Robotville exhibition from the 1st – 4th December 2011. Dora is a prototype domestic robot that explores previously unseen environments to build up maps of its location that can be used when performing tasks for humans.

Dora was displayed with 20 other unique robots, including swarming and swimming robots, exploring and humanoid robots. Roboticists from across the UK and Europe demonstrated their work and talked to visitors.

We spoke to [Dr Nick Hawes \(http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~nah\)](http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~nah), a developer of Dora from the University of Birmingham's School of Computer Science who attended the exhibition, about his experience of the week.

Was the Robotville exhibition a success?

The exhibition was a great success, with about 8,000 people attending over the week. The range of visitors was huge, from toddlers to older people, and everyone had a different interest in – and reaction to – what was on display. I think everyone was genuinely impressed by the breadth and depth of research being presented.

What was the reaction to Dora at the exhibition?

It was incredible. Whilst Dora was not the most aesthetically pleasing robot on display (New Scientist described her as "[a T-shirt on a stick \(http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/culturelab/2011/12/welcome-to-robotville-population-20.html\)](http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/culturelab/2011/12/welcome-to-robotville-population-20.html)") this was swiftly ignored once people witnessed the artificial intelligence behind her ability to build maps, explore rooms and search for objects. People happily jumped in front of her to see what her sensors would show her and we had crowds of people following her as she explored. Interestingly, people regularly tried waving and talking to her, which demonstrates the expectations that already exist for intelligent robots.

Despite Dora's abilities representing the cutting edge of Computer Science, our efforts to illustrate the underlying principles were almost always rewarded with the public understanding the ideas and asking us challenging questions. Many of our younger visitors also got a chance to drive Dora around the museum; producing more than a couple of robot collisions.

What do you hope will come out of the exhibition and the coverage that Robotville and Dora received?

Whilst the robots at [Robotville \(http://vimeo.com/33214881\)](http://vimeo.com/33214881) were some of the best around, I think a large proportion of the visitors were probably expecting to witness smarter, or better looking, systems. The reality of robotics today is challenging and fascinating, but it is a long way from the picture offered by science fiction. I hope that Robotville will have given people a deeper understanding of the technologies that exist and the issues that face AI and robotics in the future. I'd also be happy if some of the younger visitors had their eyes opened to the fact that Computer Science offers a huge array of possibilities that go beyond what they may have been taught about at school.

[Listen to Dr Nick Hawes' podcast on robots and AI \(http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Dr_Nick_Hawes_podcast.mp3\)](http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Dr_Nick_Hawes_podcast.mp3) or [read the complete transcript of the interview \(/accessibility/transcripts/Nick-Hawes-Robots-the-reality.aspx\)](#)

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