

Wolfram Alpha answer engine best of show at SXSW

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Wolfram Alpha is easy to stump, but still computes a wealth of raw data.

A new Wolfram Alpha search engine that delivers factual answers to online queries instead of links to Web pages won top honors late Sunday at the South By South West (SXSW) awards ceremony.

Wolfram Alpha was crowned "Best of Show" at the annual Web Awards that featured categories ranging from blogs, business and classic online services to mobile, game, and film innovations on the Internet.

"It is gratifying to be recognized," Wolfram Alpha's freshly-hired managing director Barak Berkowitz told AFP after accepting the award.

"We expect Wolfram Alpha will be ubiquitous all over the web, everywhere, the same way today Google Maps are."

Like online mapping services, Wolfram Alpha provides factual answers to online queries.

For example, Wolfram Alpha could tell a searcher how old a historical

figure or celebrity was when they died or solve mathematical problems.

The curated answer engine uses mathematical formulas to scour the Internet for information and natural language recognition technology to figure what queries are aimed at finding out.

"We think about what are the holes in this dream of all the knowledge of the world's people being available to everybody," Berkowitz said. "One of those holes is for there to be a fact engine on top of a search engine. That is not available today and that is what we are building."

Wolfram Alpha recently announced a deal to provide factual answers to relevant queries at Microsoft's Bing search engine.

Somewhere between five and 10 percent of Web searches are for factual answers, meaning that there are billions of queries looking for the kind of information Wolfram Alpha intends to provide, according to Berkowitz.

Wolfram Alpha launched in May of last year.

A Web award for Activism went to the people behind a Waterlife project that depicts in film and on the Web the vital role water from the Great Lakes plays in the lives of millions of people as it works its way to the ocean.

An Atlas Obscura website devoted to the "world's wonders, curiosities and esoterica" placed first in an Amusement category.

TheVilePlutocrat.com dedicated to spotlighting misdeeds of the privileged class was chosen as the best blog.

Financial services website Mint.com, which Intuit bought in September

of last year for 170 million dollars (US), was top pick in a Classic category.

Aardvark.com, a service that lets people get answers to questions from an online community of "friends or friends-of-friends," received a Web award in a social networking category.

A website devoted to the works and quirks of comedian Jim Carrey won a Web award in a Film/Television category.

Geo-location service Gowalla, which has been vying with rival Foursquare at SXSW for the devotion of technology-loving attendees, was chosen as top site tailored for mobile devices.

Gowalla lets people use smartphones equipped with satellite positioning technology keep track of where their friends are at any given moment.

A full list of the winners was available online at sxsw.com/interactive/webawards/winners .

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