

# Augmenting Public Places with Joke Telling Benches

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## ABSTRACT

We explored a possibility of using interactive benches in public settings in way that it affects peoples' mood. Joke telling bench is a regular bench that, based on the interaction with user, tells various jokes. We implemented a prototype and conducted a user-study using Wizard-of-Oz technique. Originally we targeted parks however through the user study we found such benches are equally enjoyable in various other public places.

## Author Keywords

Wizard of Oz, humor, socially acceptable systems, prototyping, augmented reality, moods, benches

## INTRODUCTION

Bringing augmented usage to public place artifacts is a big challenge especially when seen in terms of their social-acceptability and their un-disruptive integration with the original usage. Bench has a special place in a community as noted in [2], however above all it's a place to enjoy pleasant surroundings. We intend to make this very usage aspect a more enjoyable one. Although some interactive benches have been built earlier [1,2] but there focus was never on augmenting without disrupting the basic use, rather they invented new things.

In this paper we have proposed and described a bench, augmented with functionality to tell jokes, to people who are interested in them. We conducted a user study with a prototype and have concluded that it is a feasible idea.

## EARLY EVALUTATION OF IDEA

Using random words technique we originally thought of a scary bench for isolated places in the park. However using six thinking hats method, we realized that bench would be more frequently used if it tells something short and light. Therefore, we changed the idea to a joke-telling bench. Before building an actual prototype we conducted two pilot studies with three users in each. First pilot study was without a computer and was done to correct the basics of interactions involved. Then we did second pilot study using a computer to get a quick evaluation of our ideas. Based on the results, we built the prototype for actual user-study.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SYSTEM

We set up the test environment, using a sofa bench, a laptop and two speakers, in a public area just outside the Forum restaurant. The video-camera was hidden in front towards

the right of user. We recorded videos of 10 users for evaluating the system. Most of these users were there to eat at the restaurant. We decorated the place with flower stands to make it look less research-like. Laptop was hidden behind them and was connected to speakers that were hidden within a box placed under the bench.

Users were not told anything about the system before, apart from that: it's an interactive bench which tells joke when you sit on it. One of us was hiding and was controlling the laptop to play various interactive dialogues. As soon as user sat on the bench, a welcome note was played asking user whether he would like to listen a joke, if the user said "yes", a randomly selected joke was played. When system finished telling the joke, it asked the user for another one. This went on until the user said "no" as an answer. Then a note asking user to sit and relax was played. All the interactive dialogues and jokes were stored in the laptop and were recorded in the voice of native English speaker – a choice we decided-for after the second pilot study.

## USER STUDY

All sessions were recorded using a hidden camera, but we did put a sign showing that testing will be recorded. However the sign was deliberately placed at the back so that the user does not continuously make note of it. After every session the user was asked some questions regarding the concept and system's feasibility. We asked following questions:

1. What do you think about the idea?
2. Do you believe this is going to work in real?
3. Do you have any suggestions on how we can improve the idea?
4. Were you able to understand on what to do by reading instruction sign or by guessing from the setup?
5. Did you figure out that one of us was controlling the bench?

## Result

A majority of the users liked the idea of joke telling bench and believed that it could be implemented for real. However some of them said that it could be a problem if it is placed in public areas where it could possibly be vandalized. The users had lots of suggestions on where the bench could be placed. Few of the suggested places were lobbies, museums, bus stops, pubs, shopping markets, etc. There were also several suggestions for expanding the scope; like,

bench may give general information e.g. where to find: a good restaurant or a bus time table, etc.

Some of the users were confused on how to answer the bench query, but they figured this quickly when the bench asked by adding, at the end of the sentence, a clue for the answer “yes or no?”. The information on the sign was found to be confusing by some users. One user after reading it thought that it was a joke; therefore he acted little bit hesitantly. Few users actually suggested that instructions on the sign should have been more descriptive on what the bench could do. Nevertheless, apart from the very first user, none of the users were able to recognize that one of us was acting as “the bench”.

## DISCUSSION

Our primary focus was social acceptability of the idea. We found that it is very difficult to find a primary user-group in generic public places. Even in our particular settings the case was quite broad, ranging from teens to elderly people. This also affects the appropriate selection of jokes, as different user groups have different likings [3]. We in our user study played three jokes. One of them was liked by a majority. We found that there are probably some jokes which are enjoyable by various user-groups. However, we also felt there were other factors as well that affected likes and dislikes: for example; freshness of the joke, mood of the user etc. The most interesting case was that one user was a blonde and she mistakenly thought that bench somehow became aware of this – our naughty bench told her a blonde joke [4]:

*A blind man walks into a bar, taps the man next him, and says, "Hey, wanna hear a blond joke?"*

*The man says back to the blind man, "Look buddy, I'm blond. The man behind me is a 400-pound professional wrestler and he is blond. The bouncer is blond. The man sitting over to your left is also blond. Still wanna tell that blond joke?"*

*The blind man is silent for a moment and then says, "Nah, I wouldn't want to have to explain it five times."*

Somehow we found a joke that was liked by most of our users however still it is difficult to define a primary user group in our study, as humor is very subjective concept, and it is very personal, depending on gender, age, culture etc. As define in [3]: *Joke is any type of communication that has a witty or funny intent that is known in advance by the teller.*

So the definition of joke is restricted to anything said to deliberately provoke amusement and which is context free. Some other types of humor would also fit into this definition though most other types of humor are context bound. Nevertheless, we assumed that the system would have boundaries, because of the personal humor capacities and preferences. Thus anyone can sit and listen to jokes, but it is

not assured that the person would appreciate it as noted on several of our test persons when they either did not laugh at the joke or else said that they could tell a “better” one. Also, at least one laughed just for the sake of it, but later on when asked he commented that the joke was not really of his type.

## CONCLUSION

One focus of the study was interaction between humans and the bench. The bench was supported by a laptop, but the interaction took place between the human and the artifact. As desired, users were not able to recognize if any of us was steering the voice of the bench. None of the users in the study thought the idea was impossible to implement but two of the users were unsure if it could work in places other than technical museums. Our conclusion from the user study and the interviews is that the joke telling bench can, with some efforts and improvements, be implemented for real, and more importantly, it would be socially acceptable.

We noted that our joke-telling bench: (1) affected users emotions and changed theirs mood, and also (2) opened up people for conversation with each other, acting as a starting point for their conversations. Finally, primary functions of bench were not disrupted because if someone said “No” he still could just sit and relax.

## FUTURE WORK

Our aim was to augment interaction between the user and the bench which can affect user’s mood. “The jokes could have been better” was one of the reactions we got from the study. In order to tell an appropriate joke it is necessary that the system be provided with more background information, such as knowledge about the user. Achieving this is a challenge especially considering we do not want to affect the conventional usage.

If the bench can recognize the user, possibly by conversations [2], then it can remember how the user reacted last time when he sat on the bench. This will help the bench in choosing appropriate action.

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