

FlirtBar

Tom Bartindale, Dec 2010

Flirtbar is a collaboration between artists and technologists to explore how tangible interfaces can impact on the social connections at a large scale events. Deployed at a number of events including MakerFaire 2010 at the Life Center, it earned a pick of the fest from the BBC for its innovative use of beer mats as a way of interacting with a bar-top surface.

Drinks mats placed on the surface 'flirt' with each other using bad-puns and cheesy chat-up lines, getting those around chatting too.

Technologies

- Large circular rear-projected display
- IR camera based sensing of drinks mats
- WPF / dotNET application

Press Release from Newcastle University on 2nd December 2010

Forget speed-dating and the classifieds column – now you can leave it to your beer mat to make that all-important first move.

A group of computer scientists from Newcastle University have come up with a novel way of sparking up conversation across the bar.

Dubbed “FlirtBar” the invention uses camera-based, object tracking technology – similar to the interactive displays used in museums – to track specially-designed beer mats and allow them to ‘chat’ to each other across the bar.

When mats are placed on the bar, snippets of conversation are sent between them in the form of visual text messages, the words snaking across the bar and triggering a response.

Being demonstrated for the first time at an event this evening <DEC 2> “FlirtBar” is the brainchild of Newcastle University PhD students from the university’s CultureLab, and is being built by Tom Bartindale and Jack Weeden who say the aim is to prompt conversation between the owners of the drinks.

Bartindale says the idea is “that the mats gain a personality when placed on the bar, some are funny, some are naughty, some are scared of other mats and some are out to talk to everyone.”

“FlirtBar is a twist on meeting new people and flirting in a public space,” he explains. “I think most of us feel quite self-conscious and uncomfortable about starting a conversation with a stranger so what Flirtbar does is make that first move and also provides a talking point.”

Bartindale says the group first came up with the idea while they were sat in a bar in Germany.

“We were looking around at all these isolated groups of men and women and started thinking about how we could get them talking to each other without having to rely on the usual confidence-booster – alcohol.

“FlirtBar started off as a bit of fun and then we realised its potential for bringing people together.”

The technology works by using cameras to sense the positions of traditional beer mats that have been printed with markers on their underside. Text and graphics are then displayed on the tabletop, allowing the beer mats to “talk” to each other.

The conversation starters have been drawn from a variety of phrases, including humorous chat up lines, serious questions and light-hearted banter. When a drink mat is removed, other mats will comment on this, and encourage conversation with new “un-known” mats.

Weeden adds: “In general, technology tends to kill conversation and trigger quite anti-social behaviour – we bury ourselves in our text messaging, iPods or computer screens and never even look up to see who’s standing next to us.

“The focus of our work is to use technology to encourage interaction and relationships. We want these very public text messages to break the ice and make people laugh. Who knows where it might lead!”