

# Let your beer mat do the talking

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

Beer mats have always provided endless entertainment in the [bar](#) and now a group of computer scientists from Newcastle University have developed a novel way of sparking up [conversation](#) with a new generation of beer mat.

Using an interactive bar surface, camera-based technology tracks the specially-designed mats as they are moved around the bar.

When the mats are placed on the bar they 'chat' to each other in the form of visual text messages - the words scrolling across the surface like television news bulletins and triggering a response.

'Talking' amongst themselves, the mats send out a random selection of pre-programmed messages, the aim being they act as an ice-breaker and prompt conversation between the owners of the drinks.

The interactive mats are the brainchild of a group of Newcastle University PhD students from the university's Culture Lab with the system being built by Tom Bartindale and Jack Weeden.

Being demonstrated for the first time at Culture Lab's Jam45 event, the technology is part of a showcase of new and innovative audio/visual performances from across the North East.

Tom explains: "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.

"This is a twist on meeting new people in a public space. I think most of us feel quite self-conscious and uncomfortable about starting a conversation with a stranger so what our mat does is make that first move and also provides a talking point."

Tom 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 and started thinking about how we could get them talking to each other. The interactive beer mats started off as a bit of fun and then we realised their 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 bar, 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 behavior – 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.”

Provided by Newcastle University

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