

EVERYONE'S A COMEDIAN!

Empowering communities to use humor as a tool to promote social change

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My project pursues the development of a tool that empowers designers, as well as non-designers, to undertake social problems using humor as a rhetorical approach.

Humor research is a multidisciplinary field largely based on linguistic studies, but continues to prove its rhetorical influence in many areas. First rooted in Ancient Greece, the field emerged significantly in the last decade. From my literature review I identified a set of heuristics that embody how humor can be integrated into design. Specifically, I examine problems associated with political mobilization, especially public demonstrations. My

goal is to introduce designers as well as non-designers to the power of humor as a means of addressing social problems.

I am creating a mobile instructional tool that will guide the production of communication artifacts (e.g., rally signs) that use humor as a device to confront complex social issues, yielding motivation to mobilize and the foundation and/or empowerment of communities.

PHASE I: DEVELOPMENT OF HEURISTICS!

Literature Review

Design

Design Humor: The Art of Graphic Wit
Steven Heller

Visual Puns in Design Eli Kince

Humor

Causing a Scene: Extraordinary Pranks in Ordinary Places Charlie Todd & Alex Scordellis

Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical & Performative Strategy Sean Zwagerman

Linguistics

Linguistic Theories of Humor Salvatore Attardo

Rhetoric

Attitudes Toward History Kenneth Burke

My literature review consisted of studying and bridging theory within the fields of linguistics, humor, rhetoric, and design, respectively. Based on my findings, I identified a set of heuristics that can be used to guide the use of humor as rhetoric in design. Additionally, I developed eight categories of strategies for design humor.



Humor Heuristics

Determine the desired outcome of your design.

Consider the ideal reaction your target audience would have after experiencing your design. This consideration will inform you of the best medium for your design.

Humor is not always appropriate.

Humor is popular and can be exploited very easily. Only use it as a tactic if it advances communication (i.e. don't make a joke if it might close rhetorical dialogue).

It's not about you (being funny).

Don't overdo it. Simple and subtle humor can immediately trigger an audience's reflection of an idea. They audience is less likely to reflect if you explicitly spell it out for them.

Consider the target audience's relationship with humor.

Gather information about the audience's typical life and cultural experiences, language usage, behaviors, and values. What role does humor play in their lives?

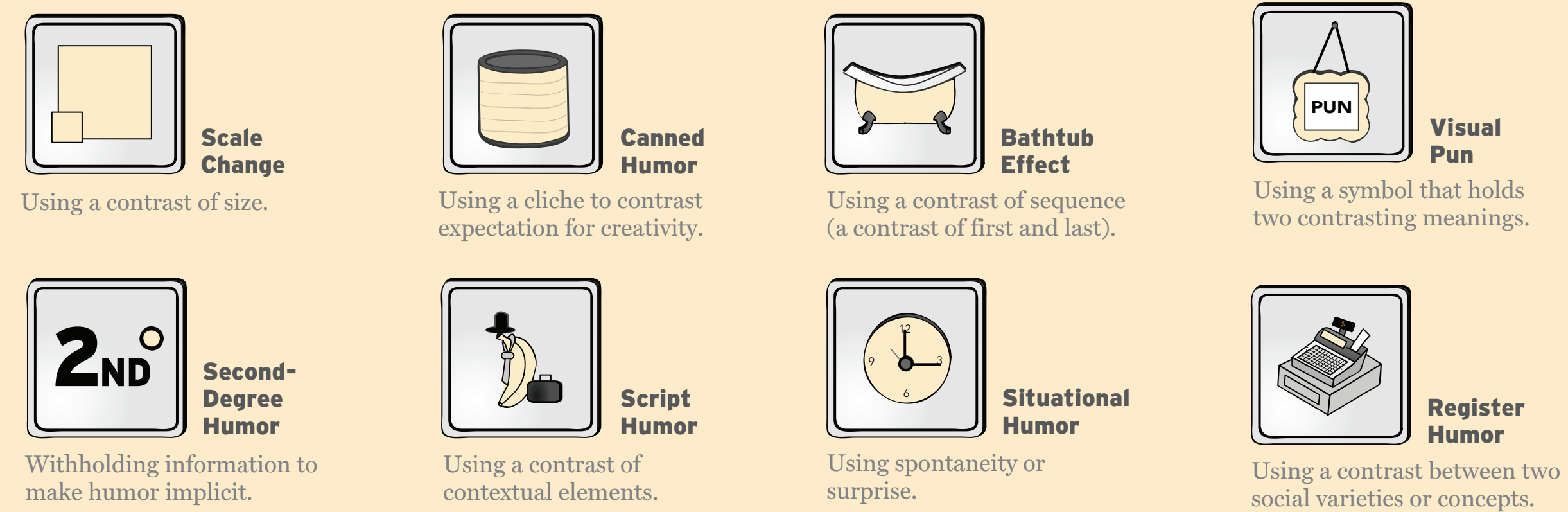
Choose humorous elements and/or strategies.

Humor comes from an incongruity, or contrast. Given audience experience with humor, what type of contrast best fits the design's argument? See below for a list of humor in design techniques.

Success?

Humor's success is not quantifiable (laughter is more physiological than mental). Feedback from the audience citing tension release and pleasure along with a continuation of the dialogue and its nature is the best sign of success.

Design humor strategies



PHASE II: APPLICATION OF HEURISTICS!

Design problem

I examine motivation problems associated with political mobilization, especially public demonstrations. I am creating a mobile tool that will guide the production of communication artifacts (e.g., rally signs) that use humor as a device to confront complex social issues, yielding motivation to mobilize and community empowerment.

Contextual Research



Rally to Restore Sanity

I attended the Rally to Restore Sanity Oct. 30, 2010 in Washington, D.C. to observe mobilization deriving from humor. Prior to the rally, I used my heuristics to create about 30 signs divided up into three different messages. I held up signs depending on the specific environment I was in and my actions. For example, while sitting on some steps, I held up a sign that said, "CHILLIN'."

I noted the interactions I had with passersby in order to gauge the heuristics' effectiveness and also to examine humor's role throughout the rally.

Key findings from my experience at the rally include:

People crave interactions spawned from positivity.

If given a platform conducive to humor, audience members can have volatile roles, switching from audience, to user, to designer.

Humorous user-centered design has a structure that includes a prompt and implied tools. The urge to switch roles then becomes contagious.

Unfocus Groups



I conducted two "unfocus" groups of four designers. Participants were given a prompt defining their audience in regards to a social problem, a few facts about the problem and the audience, my heuristics, and a bunch of materials including paper, markers, scissors, glue sticks, image thumbnails, and various craft items like "googly eyes."

Participants were asked to illustrate a design concept using as many materials as they felt necessary. Ironically the most prominent key finding was not from the products:

Designers often don't feel confident enough to use humor as a central rhetorical device.

Interviews

"If someone is holding up an interesting sign or is doing something clever it provokes conversation. You want to pass the time somehow so you engage with the people around you... You want it to be easy to find kindred spirits."

"I enjoy being in places with like-minded people... That being said, places where interaction is more likely to occur makes me socially anxious. I'd need a buffer."

NEXT STEPS!

Prototyping mobile app
Designing instructional
humor workshops

Prototype user testing
Developing mobile app
Give workshops with organizations

Conclude user tests and refine concept
Begin writing documentation

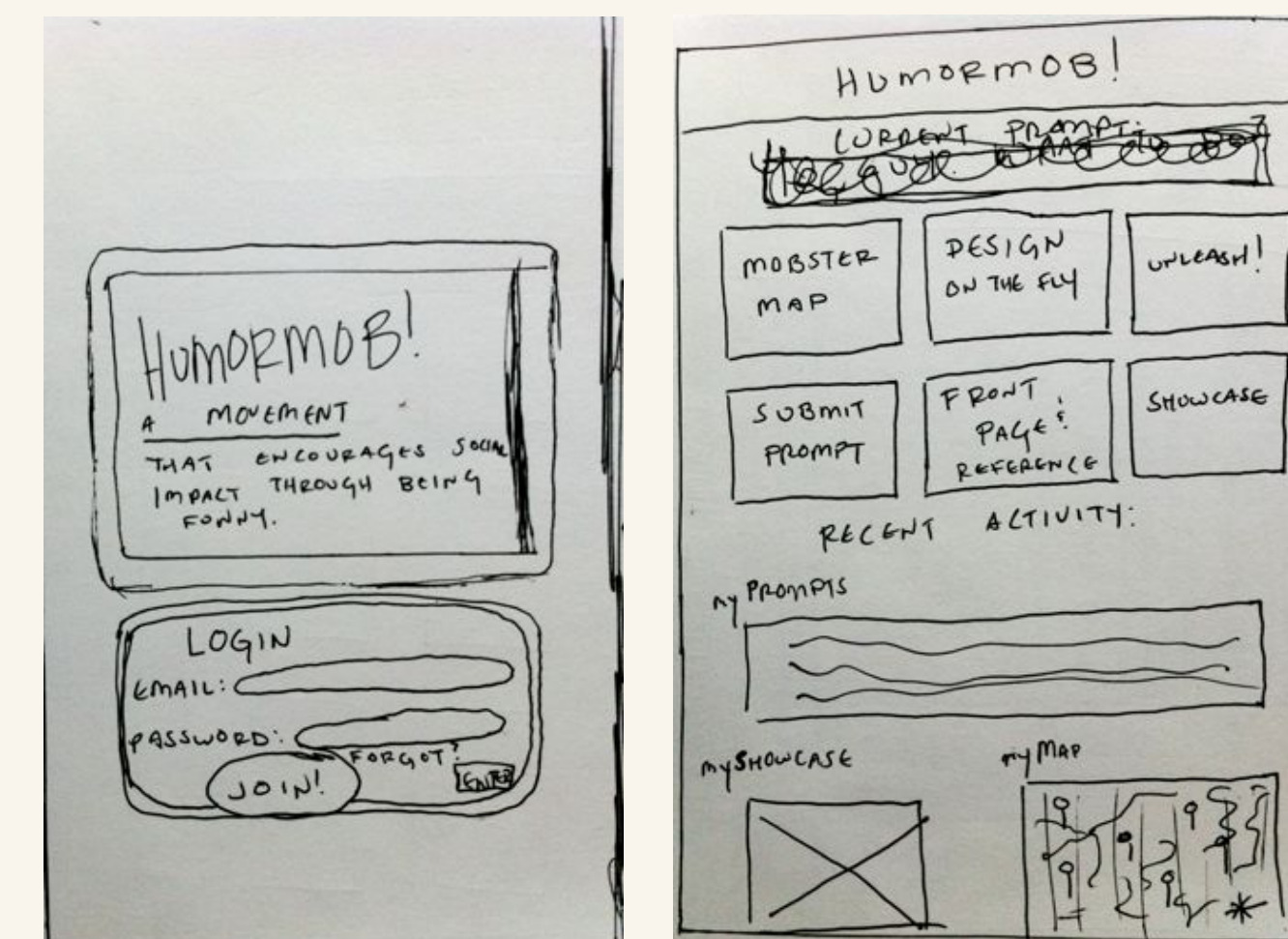
Conclude writing documentation

April

Final presentation

May

Concept Exploration



HUMORMOB!: Mobile Mobilization

I am creating a mobile application (HUMORMOB!) that will guide designers and non-designers to create humorous experiences in real time, particularly in the case of mobilization surrounding complex social issues.

The app acts an instructional tool with the heuristics for humor in design incorporated implicitly into its task flow. Because a key motivation for people to mobilize is community membership, the app's location-based features will serve to create the presence of a dynamic "humor community." A few design implications include:

Adhering to the core model of humorous user-centered design in which the roles of designer, user, and audience member are volatile.

Because of humor's "contagious" nature, design collaboration must drive the "humor community."

The goal should remain to elevate the role of humor from a primarily reactive rhetorical device to a primarily preventative rhetorical device.

