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Why scientists say simple cup-and-ball is the best magic trick of all

- **Researchers analyse audience reactions to clips of Penn & Teller performing the trick**
- **They find that facial expressions and other misdirections illusionists use are not crucial to the success of the trick**
- **New findings shed light on how and by how much people can be misdirected**

By [Charles Q. Choi](#), [INSIDE SCIENCE NEWS SERVICE](#)

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Scientists analysing how magicians Penn & Teller perform one of the oldest known illusions now reveal that some aspects of the magic trick are even more effective at manipulating audiences than the magicians predicted.

These findings not only shed light on basic processes such as cognition, but could help advance the art of magic, researchers suggested.

In recent years, neuroscientists have increasingly been analysing magicians' performances to gain insights on the human mind.

Scroll down for video



Raymond Teller of the illusionist duo Penn & Teller performs the cup and ball trick: Scientists have revealed that some aspects of the trick are even more effective at manipulating audiences than magicians predicted

'We realized that magicians were among the best people at manipulating attention and awareness, far better than scientists,' said cognitive neuroscientist Stephen Macknik, director of the laboratory of behavioural neurobiology at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona.

'So we've been poaching their techniques, bringing them back to the labs to increase our rate of discovery.'

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The latest magic trick Macknik and his colleagues investigated is the classic cups and balls illusion. Examples ascribed to ancient Roman conjurers date back to 3BC, and some claim it goes back further to ancient Egypt.

The illusion nowadays commonly involves three upside-down cups and three balls, Magicians can make the balls seemingly jump from cup to cup, disappear from one cup and appear in another, turn into other items and so on. (The modern swindler's version is the shell game.)

To learn more about this illusion, the researchers enlisted the aid of the famous duo Penn & Teller. Seven volunteers watched 10-12-second-long video clips of Teller performing the illusion in front of a NOVA scienceNOW TV crew at the duo's theatre in Las Vegas.

The balls in the illusion are typically brightly coloured, while the cups are usually opaque. Penn & Teller practice a version with three opaque and then three transparent cups.



Classic illusion: In the cup and ball trick, magicians can make the balls seemingly jump from cup to cup, disappear from one cup and appear in another, turn into other items and so on

'It's a great act, and the trick still works even with transparent cups, because they're just that good — people still can't follow all the movements and see how the trick is done,' Macknik said.

'I've seen them do this trick for more than 20 years,' said vision scientist Flip Phillips at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

'The best part of the whole routine is that, despite the fact that they are telling you what they are doing — they're showing you what they're doing — you're still amazed because you just can't fight the deception.'

Teller devised this variation while fiddling with an empty water glass and wadded-up paper napkins for balls at a Midwestern diner. He turned the glass upside down and put a paper ball on top, then tilted the glass so that the ball fell into his other hand.

The falling ball was so compelling that it drew his own attention away from his other hand, which was deftly and secretly loading a second ball under the glass.

Teller found that the sleight happened so quickly he himself did not realise he had loaded the cup. He surmised he missed it because the falling ball captured his attention.

In the experiments, the volunteers reported when they saw balls get removed from, or placed under, cups by pressing buttons. The researchers also used cameras pointed at the eyes of the volunteers to track their gazes.

The researchers found that while the falling ball did draw audience attention, other aspects of the trick were actually stronger at making the illusion work. For instance, audiences were fooled more often when the magician attempted to drop a ball that was stuck to a cup.

'A lot of times the intuitions we have about the way things work aren't the way things work,' said Phillips, who did not take part in this research.

'This isn't to put down Teller — Teller's intuition is good. There is research we did on a famous sleight of hand known as the French drop where Teller's intuition on how to sell the trick is perfectly correct.'



Misdirection: In the experiments, the volunteers reported when they saw balls get removed from, or placed under, cups by pressing buttons. The researchers also used cameras to track the gazes of the volunteers

In addition, magicians often say that success with illusions depends on how well they can use gazes and faces to manipulate where audiences look, Macknik explained. The researchers tested this idea by hiding Teller's face on the video clips with a black rectangle, and found doing so apparently did not affect the illusion.

'We're showing a discovery that magicians missed because they relied on their intuition, and their intuition was wrong,' Macknik said.

These findings support recent studies, including one from Macknik and his colleagues, which hinted that the facial expressions and other social cues magicians think are crucial to illusions may not actually be essential.

'A huge amount of training in magic is that social cues matter,' Macknik said. 'We're starting to wonder if social cues help with any magic tricks. Future research is warranted to look at the effects of social cues in illusions ... we'd like to see an effect where they really matter.'

These new findings shed light on how and by how much people can be misdirected, which could help magicians improve their art.

Macknik and his colleagues Hector Rieiro and Susana Martinez-Conde detailed their findings online Feb. 12 in the inaugural issue of the journal PeerJ.

Now watch a video of Penn & Teller performing the cup and ball trick

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For a truly fantastic variation on the cups and balls go to YouTube and watch Paul Daniels Chop Cup routine. The perfect combination of pacing, routining, humour and sleight of hand.

- [Rich](#) , London, United Kingdom, 13/2/2013 15:30

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I like the upright cabinet where the middle comes out trick myself. I'd love to know

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how they do that one.

- [bERNARD mATTHEWS](#) , Norfolk, United Kingdom, 13/2/2013 12:43

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Witchcraft.

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- [Alan Brown](#) , Chesterfield, United Kingdom, 13/2/2013 10:01

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"Why scientists say simple cup-and-ball is the best magic trick of all?" Because they

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have never seen real magic.

- [OMG](#) , My couch Over here, 13/2/2013 09:56

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I have nothing but utmost respect for Penn and Teller. Everything they do and say (Yes

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Teller does speak) is brilliant. Teller's sleight of hand is second to none, and Penn's sceptical mind make then an exceptional duo.

- [James O](#) , Macclesfield, 13/2/2013 06:13

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Sweet...I love watching a good magic trick....Don't ruin for me...I really thought

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those balls were disappearing.

- [Resident](#) , somewhere in America, 13/2/2013 04:33

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I can do a couple of cup and ball tricks but I much prefer rope tricks. When people


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watch cup and ball tricks they usually are trying to figure it out and have the reaction of how did you do that. But when you do a rope trick right their reaction is HOW DID YOU DO THAT.

- [Caleb](#) , Augusta Ga, 13/2/2013 00:54

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Paul Daniels' chop cup routine is the best ever. Worth a watch.

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- [Chris](#) , Leeds UK, 12/2/2013 23:33

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I once saw a magician in a hotel in Majorca. He was surrounded on all sides

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by holidaymakers. He showed a box sleeve, and pulled the inner box out for everyone to see. Then he filled it with tissue, put it back into the sleeve and set fire to the tissue. He pulled the box out and a real, live white duck with a black dicky-bow flew out. How the hell was this done? The duck spent the rest of the show walking around, taking crisps off the children.

- [Oldcogger](#) , Birmingham, United Kingdom, 12/2/2013 23:01

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You live you die end of . And all the clowns inbetween are after your dosh.

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- [Robinson Crusoe.](#) , Somewhere Out There., 12/2/2013 20:48

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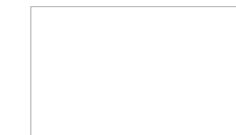
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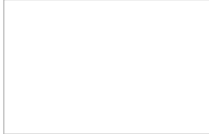
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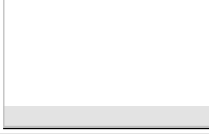
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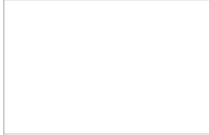
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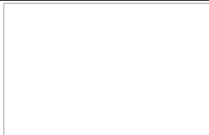
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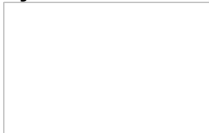
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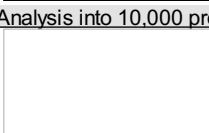
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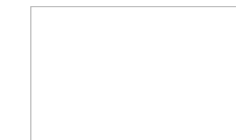
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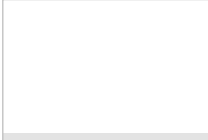
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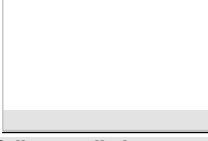
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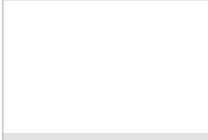
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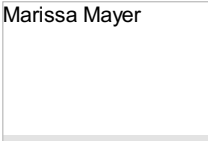
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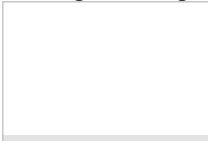
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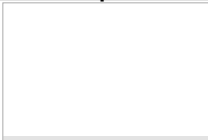
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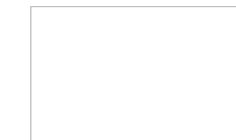
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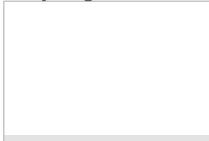
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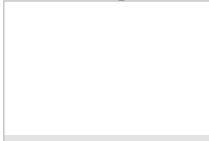
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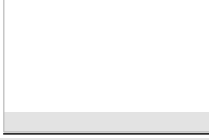
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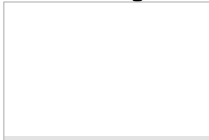
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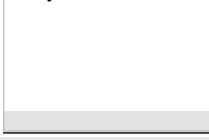
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Selena



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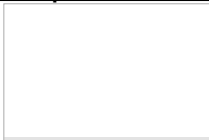
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Molly Sims



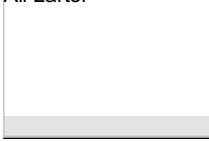
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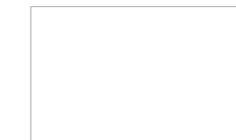
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Actress blended into the crowd in Santa Monica
Ali Larter



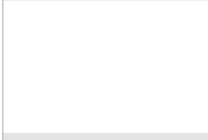
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- **Time for bed? Mel B's baby daughter can't keep her eyes open after dinner in Beverly Hills**
They only moved back to LA last week



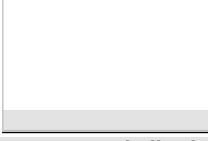
- **Aren't you sweet enough already? Rose McGowan licks a giant green lollipop as she heads to hair salon in all-white ensemble** In West Hollywood



- **Still going strong: Freida Pinto and Dev Patel can't keep their hands off each other at Vanity Fair event... even after four years together** Met as co-stars



- **Rachel Weisz gets glamorous for Oz premiere in Japan... but can't be parted from her furry white coat** Might shun the Oscars to promote her new film
Justin Bieber



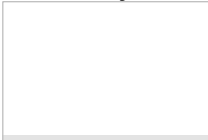
- **Selena who? Justin Bieber parties up a storm at THREE London nightclubs... and leaves with two mystery ladies in tow** Well, he is single now..



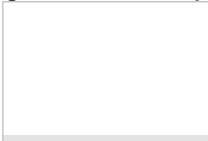
- **'Not my fault': Dazed and Confused star Jason London pleads not guilty to drunken Arizonian brawl** The 40-year-old actor was also badly injured



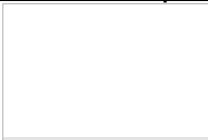
- **Dripping in jewels: Drew Barrymore and Naomi Watts dazzle at Bulgari event honoring Elizabeth Taylor** Liz had a flare for choosing fine jewels



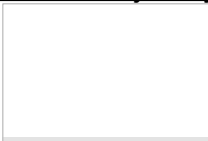
- **What a little cutie! Kimberly Stewart's daughter Delilah keeps a trip to the grocery store lighthearted as she pulls a series of pouts** Baby girl was amused



- **Charlotte York would be shocked! Kristin Davis takes the plunge in low-cut dress to attend Battle for the Elephants premiere** Showed off sexy side



- **A gold prediction? Leggy Anne Hathaway slips into metallic dress at the Costume Designers Guild Awards just days before she learns her Oscars fate**



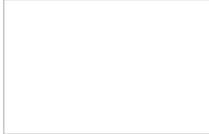
- **Masculine chic! Julianne Hough pulls off an androgynous trouser suit as she continues Safe Haven promo trip with Josh Duhamel** Co-stars in London



- **Kim Kardashian gives the first glimpse of her baby bump in a bikini photoshoot as she opens up about her easy pregnancy** No morning sickness

Morrissey

- **'A victory for the animals': Morrissey convinces concert venue to shut down McDonalds - and sell only vegetarian food - for Los Angeles show**



- **Count Barton: Mischa does her best to spook by sporting Gothic style make-up as she heads to LFW closing party** The 27-year-old opted to go vampire chic



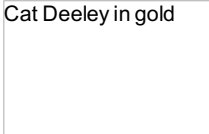
- **Taylor Armstrong denies she 'misplaced' her daughter Kennedy... but admits she was tipsy during a call which alarmed her Real Housewives co-stars**



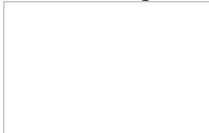
- **Wait for me! Paris Hilton charges ahead to go shopping... as injured boyfriend River Viipieri struggles to keep up on his crutches behind her** The stores couldn't wait



- **Keeping on Top of the trends! Amber Heard and her sister Whitney shop up a storm at brand new Top Shop store in Los Angeles** Braved the rain in LA



- **Golden girl! Cat Deeley shimmers in metallic gown and shows off her new blonder hairdo at Costume Designers Guild Awards** At Beverly Hilton Hotel



- **Freshening up her act for new friend Dave? Britney Spears dons trendy studded coat and wedge high tops as she knocks back a box of breath mints**



- **Rihanna unveils ad campaign for her hot new River Island collection starring Jourdan Dunn and Charlotte Free** Her range in London



- **Baby it's cold outside! Sarah Jessica Parker's cute twins Marion and Tabitha step out in their favorite matching plaid parkas** Family in New York



- **On the prow! Rosie Huntington-Whiteley turns the sidewalk into her catwalk with leopard print accessories and fringe boots** Landed at LAX



- **Bare-faced and beautiful: Amy Smart goes make-up free for lunch in Los Angeles** The actress showed off her natural beauty for a casual day out

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GADGET REVIEWS

This week Daily Mail Games put our swift-swiping fingers to the test and got stuck in to Lady Shotgun's Buddha Finger. And it's brilliant, if slightly frantic, fun.

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In the current headphone market, quality sound is not enough. Consumers want both fashion and function, and that's where the iLuv headphones come in.

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Beauty, brawn and a blistering sound quality. Tritton's latest, fully licenced, exclusive Xbox 360 headset is a joy to behold from the moment you begin unboxing.

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Boasting the latest in design and tech, the Ear Force headphones from Turtle Beach claim to offer the definitive audio experience for gaming. And they don't disappoint.

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Raw, undistorted power. That's what Atomic Floyd claim their latest creation, the PowerJax, has in spades. And thankfully, they're every bit as monstrous as expected.

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With their aggressive styling, thunderous bass and unflinchingly in-your-face packaging, there is nothing subtle about VIBE's BlackDeath headphones.

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Quality sound usually comes at a price. But while RHA's SA950is won't win any beauty awards, their audio output blows away similarly-priced opposition.

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Michael Hanlon

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