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Magic teaches us about human cognition -- UPDATED

POSTED BY [CORY DOCTOROW](#), AUGUST 5, 2008 2:26 AM | [PERMALINK](#)

The Boston Globe's Ideas section covers a paper just published in Nature Neuroscience about the way that magic tricks illuminate the inner workings of human perception -- the paper is co-authored by five magicians, including Teller of Penn and Teller:

“Our picture of the world is kind of a virtual reality,” says Ronald A. Rensink, a professor of computer science and psychology at the University of British Columbia and coauthor of a paper on magic and psychology that will be published online this week in Trends in Cognitive Sciences. “It’s a form of intelligent hallucination.”

The benefit of these sorts of cognitive shortcuts is that they allow us to create a remarkably rich image of our environment despite the fact that our two optic nerves have roughly the resolution of cell-phone cameras. We don't have to, for example, waste time making out every car on the highway to understand that they are, indeed, cars, and to make sense of how they are moving - our minds can simply approximate from the thousands of cars we have already seen in our lives.

But because this method relies so heavily on expectation - not only to fill in the backdrop around us but to determine where to send what psychologists call our “attentional spotlight” - we are especially vulnerable to someone who knows our expectations and can manipulate them, someone like a magician.

“In magic,” says Teller, half of the well-known duo Penn & Teller and one of five magicians credited as coauthors of the Nature Reviews Neuroscience paper, “we tend to take the things that make us smart as human beings and turn those against us.”

[How magicians control your mind](#) (via *Architectures of Control in Design*)

Update: Hurrah! Nature Neuroscience has [put the whole article online free](#)

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