Visualizing Engagement: The Power of Fun, Interactive, Sketching and Humour in Conference Networking (F.I.S.H.)

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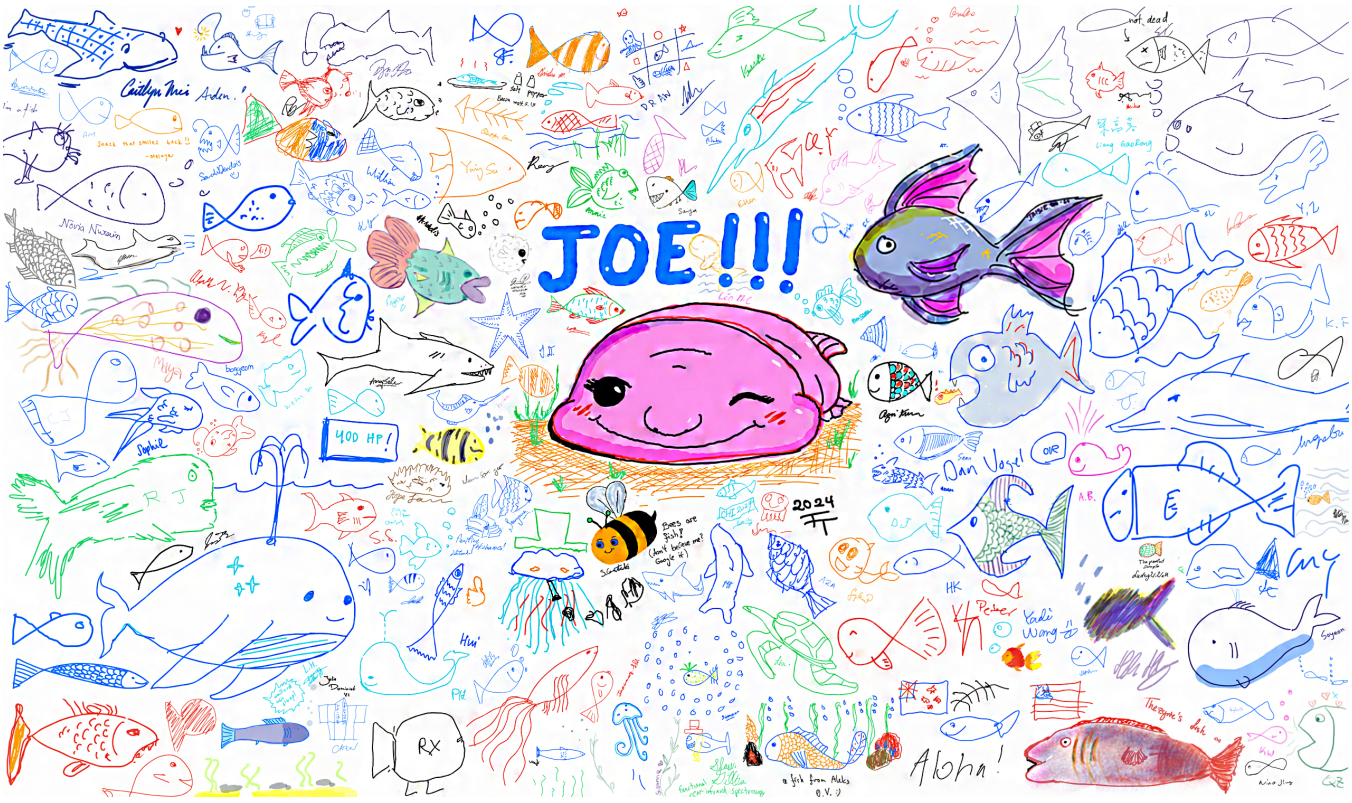


Figure 1: An art mural of all the sketches (n=154) drawn at CHI 2024.

Abstract

In today's fast-paced conference environment, traditional networking methods often fall short of fostering genuine connections. This case study explores innovative strategies for enhancing attendee engagement through the F.I.S.H. framework: Fun, Interactive, Sketching, and Humour. By integrating these elements, attendees can break down barriers, promote creativity, and cultivate a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to meaningful interactions. I discuss the role of sketching as a visual communication medium that encourages collaboration and idea sharing, while humour acts as the chum, attracting participants to the conversation and preventing the social waters from becoming stagnant and keeping awkwardness from hooking anyone. Through two case studies, I highlight the effectiveness of this medium in transforming the conference experience, ultimately leading to richer connections and enhanced networking outcomes. This research encourages the practical application of creative engagement techniques, such as sketching, at conferences. The findings suggest that this approach can significantly improve networking outcomes and foster a more vibrant and innovative community.

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CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Activity centered design**.

Keywords

Fun, Interactive, Sketching, Humour, Conference, Networking

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1 Introduction

In the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), social interaction plays a critical role in fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and innovation. Conferences are key venues where these interactions can flourish, yet they often fall short of supporting the needs of all attendees, especially those who are new to the community or naturally introverted [4, 12]. For students or early-career researchers, initiating conversations with established experts can be an intimidating challenge, creating barriers to the meaningful exchange of ideas and professional growth [15]. This case study addresses this gap by exploring strategies to "break the ice" in ways that leave lasting impressions and facilitate more open and productive discussions, both during and after the conference [1, 18]. In particular, my research goals are:

- Explore how creative, non-traditional methods—such as interactive activities, and visual communication—can improve networking experiences in conference settings.
- Develop approaches for face-to-face conference environments that encourage spontaneous and structured interactions among diverse attendees.
- Create engagement methods that make networking easier, more enjoyable, and memorable for all attendees.

Drawing from personal experiences as a volunteer and attendee, I observed the challenges these individuals face in initiating conversations with experts, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful exchange and professional growth. This paper explores the development of the F.I.S.H. framework (Fun, Interactive Sketching, and Humour), a solution inspired by my own experiences navigating these barriers. Through a reflective, autoethnographic approach, I document the moments where traditional networking methods failed to create genuine connections and how these shortcomings led to the conceptualization of more creative, interactive engagement strategies. The framework's elements are designed to break the ice by fostering shared experiences that ease social tension and encourage dialogue, making networking easier and more memorable.

2 Barriers to Networking at Conferences

Establishing connections with strangers is often challenging due to social norms [14], a pervasive fear of negative consequences associated with socializing [3], and the tendency to rely on superficial topics for conversation [7]. I have experienced this firsthand at various conferences, where the pressure of social etiquette sometimes left us feeling hesitant to engage with others, as noted by [12]. As a result, ice-breaking activities have become imperative for fostering interpersonal relationships. These activities not only help attendees overcome their nervousness and social barriers but also guide them toward more positive communication and socialization [10].

Reflecting on my own experiences, I have found that participating in these activities has made a significant difference in my ability to connect with fellow attendees. With the advent of technology, ice-breaking activities have evolved beyond traditional physical games [5], social robots [13, 18], wearable devices [2] and creation of jointly-designed appetizer with distinct flavour profiles [17] in HCI. I have witnessed how interactive technology can effectively facilitate conversations in social environments, helping strangers forge closer connections within HCI. However, these interactions do not need to be overly complex to facilitate social interaction at conferences. From my experience, I classify that for this approach to work, three main conditions must be met (see Table 1 for a summary):

Table 1: Main Conditions for Effective Ice-Breaking Activities

Condition	Summary Description
Fast and Quick	Activities should be quick and engaging to fit into the limited time available during conference breaks and transitions.
Low Entry Barrier	Activities must be easy to join and participate in, ensuring that all attendees, regardless of their social comfort level, can engage without hesitation.
Interactive and Fun	Incorporating elements that are interactive and enjoyable helps to create a relaxed atmosphere, making it easier for attendees to connect and communicate.

Fast and Quick emphasizes the need for attendees to express their thoughts visually, facilitating rapid communication and idea sharing to break the ice efficiently. At conferences, attendees often have very limited time during breaks or while moving between sessions. Thus, activities should be both engaging and swift, maximizing the value of these brief interactions.

Low Entry Barrier focuses on ensuring activities are easy for everyone to join. Ice-breaking activities with minimal preparation and straightforward rules become accessible to all attendees, regardless of their social comfort level. This simplicity reduces the anxiety often associated with networking, enabling attendees to engage without feeling overwhelmed [17].

Interactive and Fun aspect is for creating a relaxed atmosphere that fosters socialization. Often, engaging elements in ice-breaking activities transform networking from a daunting task into an enjoyable experience. Playful activities—such as collaborative drawing or light-hearted games—encourage interaction, making attendees more likely to connect and engage [11]. The laughter and shared enjoyment from these experiences act as social lubricants, easing tensions and breaking down barriers. By prioritizing fun and interaction, conferences can facilitate meaningful discussions and lasting relationships among attendees. This aligns with Lee et al. [9] work, which highlights the potential of mobile

devices as collaborative sensing systems to enable casual group conversations proactively.

3 Methodology

This case study examines ice-breaking activities implemented at two conferences: CHI Play 2023 [1] and CHI 2024 [2], attracted diverse audiences. Recognizing that not all conference attendees encounter the same barriers to engagement, the study focused on my own experiences such as being a*newcomer* to the community, *introverted*, and/or those usually attending *alone*.

In Case Study 1, the aim was to explore various approaches to facilitating social interactions among attendees. Attendees were approached during the registration process and breaks, including lunch. A 12.9-inch iPad Pro (3rd generation) paired with an Apple Pencil was provided to attendees, who were instructed to "sketch a fish". I selected a fish (🐟) as the sketching prompt due to its simplicity, ensuring it was accessible to attendees regardless of their artistic skill level. These elements also reflected the three key conditions outlined in Table 1, focusing on ease of participation, interactivity, and enjoyment.

In Case Study 2, a similar approach was applied on a much larger scale at CHI 2024 (where the number of attendees was approximately twenty times greater than at CHI Play). Despite the increased scale and complexity of the event, the goal remained the same: to foster social interactions and inclusivity. Attendees were approached in high-traffic areas, such as registration desks, coffee breaks, poster sessions, and networking events, as well as during more relaxed moments like lounge areas (including student lounges). Special attention was given to individuals who appeared hesitant or were observing from the sidelines, as their curiosity was piqued when a group of people gathered, drawn by the *laughter*. Short, unstructured discussions, lasting 5-10 minutes, were conducted in quieter settings to explore participants' feelings while sketching the fish and gather their suggestions for improving engagement strategies. These conversations also offered insights into their conference experiences and motivations for attending. In addition, I also analyzed attendee behaviour, focusing on initial encounters and communication patterns; such as student attendees, professors and industry professionals.

4 Case Study 1: Exploring Sketching as an Ice-Breaking Activity at CHI Play 2023

In Case Study 1, pre-icebreaker planning was key to maximizing participant engagement. As the student volunteer at the reception, I had pre-conference access to the room layout, which allowed me to identify less congested areas and facilitate more focused interactions.

To initiate interactions, I approached attendees with a lighthearted prompt: *"Hi, my name is X. Would you like to draw a fish?"* This invitation was designed to create a welcoming and informal atmosphere, encouraging individuals to express their creativity through a straightforward and approachable activity. The drawing activity not only served as a conversation starter but also offered attendees an opportunity to share laughter and connect over a shared task. This approach aligns with the study's focus on providing accessible, interactive, and enjoyable experiences, as outlined in the three key conditions (Table 1).

4.1 The Role as a Student Volunteer And Attendee's Perception

As a student volunteer at this smaller, single-track conference spanning a few days, my role offered unique opportunities to interact with attendees more comfortably. Wearing the volunteer t-shirt made me appear approachable, helping to bridge the gap and reduce the sense of unfamiliarity. Being part of the organizing team also offered insights into the event's structure, helping me navigate the venue effectively and identify prime spots for meaningful social interactions. I observed a lively atmosphere throughout the conference, particularly during informal settings such as dinner sessions, where laughter and engaging conversations extended beyond the formal sessions. These informal moments fostered personal connections among attendees, creating a welcoming and interactive environment. I noted that professional standing significantly influenced social comfort levels during the activity. Student attendees generally displayed a more approachable and open demeanor, while senior professionals often exhibited greater hesitancy in initiating interactions on the first day. However, as the conference progressed, this dynamic shifted, with all attendees becoming interested in participating in the activity and engaging with others.

4.2 Brief Moments of Hesitation But Attendees Slowly Engaged In The Activity

These barriers are especially significant in professional settings, where interactions can feel formal or intimidating. For instance, when I suggested that attendees sketch a fish, some questioned whether drawing a lobster or other creatures would still align with the activity's inclusive goals Figure 3. Attendees often asked, *"Is this for a study?"*, highlighting the natural skepticism that can arise when participating in unfamiliar activities with strangers. Rather than limiting their creativity to just "drawing a fish," I reassured them that it was entirely up to their imagination. This flexibility not only enriched the sketches but also added a playful layer of self-expression, aligning with the key goal of making the activity more enjoyable and memorable for all attendees as seen in Figure 2.

4.3 Encouraging Playfulness and Creativity

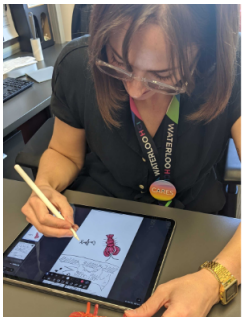
I observed a diversity of drawing styles during the activity: some attendees incorporated "HCI" elements into their drawings, reflecting a clear connection to the conference themes, while others focused more on aesthetic and creative exploration by spending time colouring their sketches. Participants with prior drawing experience invested more time and effort into their sketches, using multiple colours and adding intricate details. In contrast, those without artistic skills tended to produce simpler, less detailed works. These observations suggest that prior artistic experience plays a significant role in how individuals engage creatively, with

[1] CHI PLAY 2023 was the annual symposium on Human-Computer Interaction in Play (known as Player-Computer Interaction), held in Stratford, Ontario, Canada, in a hybrid format. https://chiplay.acm.org/2023/

[2] CHI 2024 was the premier international conference on Human-Computer Interaction held in Honolulu, Hawaii. https://chi2024.acm.org/



Figure 2: An art mural of all the sketches (n=85) drawn at CHI Play 2023 created by Tu [16].



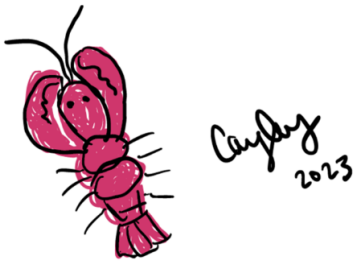


Figure 3: An attendee drew a lobster at CHI Play 2023.

skilled participants feeling more confident and comfortable expressing themselves visually. This diversity in engagement further highlighted the importance of allowing participants the freedom to express their creativity in ways that aligned with their own personal experiences and expertise.

However, it is worth noting that the smaller scale of the conference, with its single-track format, resulted in a standardized schedule for all attendees, making it easier for everyone to attend the same sessions and interact with one another. From this case study, I pinpoint further questions such as: *"How can I adapt the strategies that worked in the smaller conference to facilitate interactions in a larger conference setting that features multiple tracks and presentations?"*

5 Case Study 2: CHI 2024

Building on the success of our ice-breaking approach from Case Study 1, I implemented the same sketch-based method at CHI 2024, a significantly larger conference with various tracks running simultaneously. The goal was to explore whether this simple activity, which encouraged attendees to draw and engage in light conversation, could scale effectively in a more complex and fast-paced environment.

Unlike the smaller conference, where attendees followed a single track and had more shared experiences, the larger, multi-track format at CHI posed new challenges. Attendees were more dispersed, making it harder to gather attendees in one place. Despite this, I strategically placed myself in high-traffic areas like coffee breaks and lounge spaces, where attendees from different tracks would naturally intersect.

5.1 Initial Challenges in Interaction and the Bandwagon Effect

Initiating interactions at the larger CHI 2024 conference was notably more challenging compared to previous experiences. The absence of the recognizable student volunteer t-shirt, which had previously served as a visual identifier, made it harder to start conversations. However, familiar faces from CHI Play 2023 provided a sense of continuity, helping to build initial momentum for the activity. As the activity gained traction, attendees' perceptions shifted. Word-of-mouth played a critical role, with participants commenting, "There's someone going around collecting fish drawings." This growing awareness led to a bandwagon effect, making subsequent interactions easier and enabling the icebreaker to

become more effective. Attendees appreciated the fun and approachable nature of the activity as it spread through informal recommendations.

5.2 Interactions in Informal Spaces

Some of the most organic and meaningful conversations occurred outside the formal conference setting. At lunch vendors, afterparty events, and even the airport, attendees had more unstructured time, allowing for deeper engagement [8]. These settings encouraged the creation of more elaborate and detailed sketches, contrasting with the quick, functional drawings often made during busy conference sessions. Attendees remarked on how these informal moments felt less rushed and more conducive to genuine connection.

In addition, many participants who took the time to use multiple colours in the sketches appreciated the downtime while waiting for the next presentation track. They all noted that it was a fun and enjoyable activity during the wait, as shown in Figure 1.

5.3 The Role of Conference Badges

Attendees perceived conference badges as an important visual cue for fostering interactions. Outside the structured conference environment, the badges acted as a subtle yet effective indicator, signaling shared participation and encouraging conversations in informal spaces. This small but significant detail extended the reach of the icebreaking activity, enabling connections beyond the confines of the venue.

6 Lessons Learned

Through this experience, I observed that others began adopting my sketching format. However, I overheard them expressing frustrations with their phones due to lag issues while trying to sketch. This indicates a need for smoother digital interactions during such activities.

6.1 The F.I.S.H. Framework: Fun Interactive Sketches through Humour

The F.I.S.H. framework emphasizes Fun, Interactive Sketches, and incorporates Humour as a vital element to facilitate social engagement and networking at conferences. Here's how this framework manifests in practice:

- **Ideal for Downtime:** The sketching activity is particularly well-suited for moments of downtime at conferences. attendees are given an easy and enjoyable way to engage with one another while waiting, whether during breaks or in informal settings. This approach not only makes waiting time more enjoyable but also fosters organic interactions among attendees.
- **Effective in High-Traffic Areas:** This activity thrives in locations where attendees naturally congregate, such as during registration or at sign-up desks. These high-traffic areas provide excellent opportunities for attendees to engage with each other while waiting, making the activity both practical and engaging. By strategically placing the sketching activity in these areas, organizers can maximize participation and interaction.
- **Poster Sessions and Exhibition Halls:** Incorporating sketching at poster sessions or exhibition halls can enhance engagement around research presentations. Attendees can create sketches related to the content being presented, prompting discussions and feedback in an interactive way.
- **Networking Tool for Student Volunteers:** For student volunteers, the F.I.S.H. framework offers a powerful opportunity to expand their professional network. By facilitating interactions with attendees through light-hearted sketching, volunteers can break the ice and create connections with experts in their field. This informal approach helps bridge the gap that might exist in more formal settings, enabling meaningful conversations about research interests and potential collaborations.

By incorporating F.I.S.H., I facilitated social connections among attendees while demonstrating the core principles of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI): enhancing user experience, fostering collaboration, and bridging gaps between individuals in both formal and informal settings. Furthermore, the sketches proved valuable for following up with attendees during research discussions, as they helped recall their drawings and enabled meaningful networking.

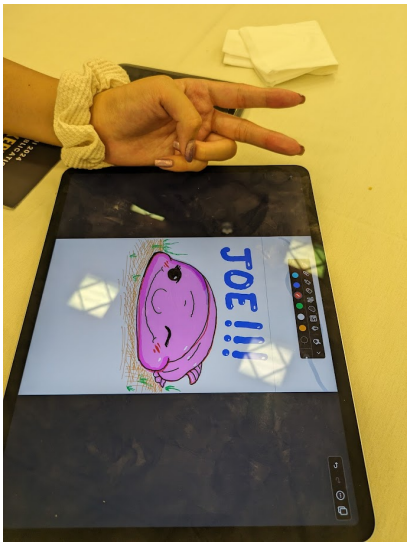
7 Limitations and Future Work

While our personal insights highlight the effectiveness of the sketching activity, several limitations should be considered. The dynamics of the activity may vary in larger conferences with more attendees and multiple tracks. Further research is necessary to determine how to adapt the ice-breaking activity to accommodate diverse audiences and maintain engagement across different contexts. Additionally, individuals may respond differently to the activity based on their personality types and social comfort levels [6]. Future studies could investigate tailored approaches that address varying degrees of extroversion and introversion to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness for online and remote platforms.

Although the immediate interactions were positive, I did not assess the long-term relationships or connections formed as a result of the activity. Future research could evaluate the lasting effects of these engagements on attendees' professional networks and collaborations. To build on our personal insights, I recommend further exploration of how to adapt and refine this ice-breaking method for different conference formats and audiences. Expanding the scope of research to include longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the sustainability of connections formed during these interactions.

Acknowledgments

This case study is written as "I"; however, this would not be possible for all those who have supported this idea. Thank you to everyone who drew a fish at CHI 2024 (and CHI Play 2023). Also, to the person who started doing the same with "cat" drawings, I can call you a "copy cat*fish*". As an introvert myself and also my first CHI conference, I hope to continue this tradition in the coming years and perhaps make this a permanent booth in the near



(a) The attendee had downtime and took significantly longer to draw a "fish".



(b) The attendee enjoyed their sketch and wanted a picture as a memory.



(c) I encountered an attendee at the airport, after the conference ended.

Figure 4: Various photos of the attendees with their sketches.

future towards combining the elements of Art and HCI. Supplementary material is available on the Open Science Framework at: https://osf.io/4ahq8/.

Grammarly (with AI) assisted in restructuring some of the sentences, reducing the words within the abstract and reducing the word count for readability. All the ideas and thought process was written by me. No other computational tools were utilized in this case study. This work was made possible by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Lennart Nacke's NSERC Discovery Grant, the Canada Foundation for Innovation John R. Evans Leaders Fund "The seamless user-centered conscious experience study system (SUCCESS)".

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