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Observations

Opinion, arguments & analyses from the editors of Scientific American

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Color-Changing Dots Earn Best Illusion of the Year Award

By [John Matson](#) | May 10, 2011 03:15 PM | 3

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Go ahead, give the video below a spin—pun fully intended. Focus on the white dot in the middle.

Did the dots appear to stop changing color when they began to rotate? If so, give the animation another look: the dots change color throughout, but their spinning motion somehow suppresses the viewer's ability to detect those changes.

The illusion, titled "Silencing awareness of change by background motion," won top honors May 9 at the 2011 [Best Illusion of the Year](#) contest in Naples, Fla. The event,

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Observations: Color-Changing Dots Ea...

which is in its seventh year, is an offshoot of the annual Vision Sciences Society meeting, also in Naples. Jordan Suchow, a Harvard University graduate student, and George Alvarez, an assistant professor in Harvard's psychology department, created the winning entry.

The contest draws all manner of illusory entries. The 2011 first and second runners-up were also animations, [one an illusion of contrast](#) and [one an illusion of visual aftereffects](#) induced by motion, respectively. (See [all 10 finalists here](#).) Last year's winner, on the other hand, was a video of an actual physical object that seemed to defy gravity—balls rolled right up inclined ramps as if pulled by magnets.

For a more in-depth take on the science behind this year's winning illusion, check out a study (pdf) Suchow and Alvarez wrote in the [January 25 issue of Current Biology](#).

Tags: [Vision](#), [Perception](#), [Neuroscience](#), [Optical Illusions](#)

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1. [m1rv9n41v5](#)
05:12 AM 5/11/11

I don't think its the best illusion that I've ever seen throughout my life.

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2. [andi47591](#)
12:30 AM 5/12/11

I would like to direct this message to the creators of this design. You should place a warning on this. There is a fair amount of people in this nation that you could be physically be impairing. I am speaking about epileptics. The vibration and flashing of the colors can set off seizures. Please don't let this cause unnecessary harm to people. Please issue a warning with this video.

Thank you sincerely.
From a concern Mother of a Epileptic

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3. [slimfinger](#)
12:55 AM 5/12/11

I do not mean to appear uncompassionate, but isn't it safe to assume that any epileptic would know better than to activate and stare at a video of a large array of bright and flashy colors under the bold header "Best Optical Illusion of the Year"? :)

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