

## FEATURE

## Take my joke, please!

Make the world laugh at Milwaukee-based website Comic Wonder



You know how your crazy uncle is always e-mailing jokes about Japanese businessmen playing golf and mentally retarded blondes jumping off cliffs? Thanks to Milwaukee couple Jeff and Kelly Fitzsimmons, your uncle can now record his awful jokes and post them on the Internet. The Fitzsimmonses recently launched Comic Wonder, a labor of love they hope becomes the YouTube of joke-telling. The format is simple—you call the site's phone number, record a joke, and let the yuks pour in from all corners of cyberspace. A self-described "competitive arena for joke-tellers," Comic Wonder invites visitors to separate the George Carlins from the Carrot Tops by voting on the best jokes. The Fitzsimmonses recently spoke with *The A.V. Club* about the serious art of joke-telling.

**The A.V. Club:** How did this idea come about?

**Jeff Fitzsimmons:** The genesis of the idea is that jokes are funny but people are hilarious. Joke-telling is the original viral content. You hear a great joke at school, and you go home and tell it to your buddies. It travels very slowly, and the jokes change.

**AVC:** It seems like such an obvious idea, and yet nobody did it before you.

**JF:** We actually did a prototype version of the site and were ready to launch in 1999. You're right, the idea that it hasn't been done, I felt that in 1999. We were shopping it around, talking to people, and we kept having this conversation: "No, the users generate the content." And everyone was like, "What? Leave it to the professionals." People were just starting to understand viral distribution.

**AVC:** So, the focus is on the delivery as much as the joke?

**JF:** That's the beauty of *The Aristocrats*. That movie has one joke, but it's about how they tell it differently. If you can apply that to "The Aristocrats," you can apply it to lots of different jokes. Our hope is to accelerate the evolution of good joke-telling. Now you can listen to what has been deemed by the community a good joke, and you can elaborate on it and tell it better. If you're going to go on *American Idol*, you have to go in front of a lot of people and sing really well, or go in front of a lot of people sing really poorly. With this, anybody can spend a little bit of time and learn to tell a joke.

**AVC:** What kind of standards do you have?

**JF:** Oh, we don't have standards.

**Kelly Fitzsimmons:** [Laughs.] This is a de-

mocracy. People vote.

**AVC:** What about really racist or sexist jokes?

**JF:** We have a filter for hate speech, which is illegal. But we don't know where the lines are going to be. We're basically inviting the whole world to throw a kegger at our house, so who knows what's going to happen? There are levels of filters, so people who come to the site anonymously will get the G-rated and PG-rated stuff. The questionable material you need to be logged in for—that's anything with sexual content, swearing, that kind of stuff. The exciting part is we don't know what to expect. I've seen some scary e-mail jokes in text form, so that's sort of the dark side of this world here. People can take a joke that's really great and make it even greater through performance; I think people will be able to take kind of a scary joke and make it ever scarier. [Laughs.]

**AVC:** What kind of jokes do you like?

**KF:** I like jokes that point out our frailties, the things we do that are just completely stupid. I like universal, "Oh my gosh, look how dumb people are" jokes.

**JF:** What's exciting to me are the genres don't know about. Our friend Mark—he did a Twisted Sister video a long time ago and just did a second project with them—he came back and was like, "I have the biggest list of lead-singer jokes." It's kind of like blonde jokes but it's about the lead singer. That's what's cool about this: We're going to find, good or bad, these nooks and crannies of joke-telling. —Steven Hyden

Share your best Japanese businessman joke at [comicwonder.com](http://comicwonder.com).

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