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## Touch Me, Feel Me

Stunning 3-D graphics, multimedia surround sound--that's so 1999. It's time for a computer that delivers content you can feel and even smell.

by Jennifer Tanaka | Aug 28 '00

If you've ever watched "the Jetsons," you, too, may long for the day when you can push a button on your console and out comes a rack of lamb, deliciously fabricated in an instant through the magic of technology. Sadly, the best simulation of reality that software programmers have been able to produce thus far is making your computer interface look like a "desktop." Actually, that's pretty cool, but aren't we ready for the next step?

Leaping into the void, a handful of companies are coming out with products that enable the average user to feel the virtual space inside a computer monitor and, yes, smell it too. Immersion Corp., out of San Jose, Calif., has developed a mouse that uses a tiny internal motor to simulate the sense of touch as you move your cursor across the computer screen--whether you're skimming across the Windows desktop, working inside a program like Quicken or surfing the Web. It's as if the contents of your screen have been turned into a Braille version of themselves. DigiScents is performing a similar trick, but for your nose instead of your fingertips. The Oakland-based company has created a PC peripheral that sort of looks like an audio speaker but emits a gentle poof of scent--patchouli, grape, freshly cut grass--instead of sound.

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I've tried both products and, surprise, they actually work. The tactile-feedback mouse from Immersion is a combination of advanced hardware and software engineering, the sum of which creates a convincingly real sensation of surface texture. Move your screen cursor over a "feedback enabled" icon, and you will feel a corresponding bump as you ride over its edge. You can choose from a variety of feels: crisp, rubbery, metallic, one called "sonicvibe," which is similar to reverb. My favorite is basketball--hard to describe, but it feels exactly how you think it would: bouncy. "There's an infinite variety of sensations, and users can modify them at will," says Immersion's CTO Bruce Schena.

Force-feedback technology isn't new; joystick controllers for videogames have used it for years to simulate the shimmy of your wheel in a race-car game, for example, or the kickback of your firearm in a shoot-'em-up. The advance this year is that Immersion has shrunk the parts to fit in a regular-size mouse chassis and lowered the cost of production so that the final mouse, made by third-party peripherals manufacturers, can cost about \$50. (Look for Logitech's iFeel MouseMan in stores for \$39.95 around the end of September.) Immersion has also created a new software-development kit for the Web so that site makers can imbue their hyperlinks with customized sensations.

DigiScents is leading the smell revolution in digital interfaces. The company's system, called iSmell, consists of cartridges that contain 128 organic scent compounds--the red/blue/green of smell, in a sense--that can be mixed in varying ratios to create thousands of more complex odors. These cartridges are loaded into a desktop device, roughly the size of a speaker. When you click on a scent-enabled Web link, iSmell receives an instruction to process the digital recipe for a scent, the cartridge squirts it out in the correct ratio and a small fan blows an aromatic cloud toward your nose.

The possible applications? Online greeting cards redolent of roses, the whoosh of chocolate as you enter an Internet candy store, the whiff of gunpowder in a videogame. You could attach scents to MP3s, to digital movie trailers, to regular e-mail. "There's this whole new dimension of communication that can be created based on this," says cofounder Dexter Smith, who notes that more than 700 computer-game developers have applied for the DigiScents software kit.

But is this a good thing? Imagine that you're happily clicking your way through the Web when--pfffttt!--your iSmell device gasses you with an odor-enhanced ad for bad cologne or, worse, deodorant. "This device is like any other device on your desktop," says Smith. "You can turn it down, or turn it off." Definitely try before you buy. The iSmell could be in stores as early as Christmas for \$80 to \$150.

Can tasting the Web be far behind? Believe it or not, a company called TriSENX in Savannah, Ga., has already prototyped a box it calls the SENXMachine, which sprays a flavor solution on a potato-starch wafer that you can lick or eat entirely. The best part? Virtual calories.

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