

Garments Scent to Delight You

(Waikato Times – 22nd Dec 2004)

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Perfume, gadgets and garments. Chances are you will be giving or getting one or the other this Christmas. If the visions of some researchers are anything to go by, though, during future festive seasons, you might well come across them all wrapped up in one package.

Take shopping. Not all the sensations of downtown buying – the crush and rush – are negative: savour again that aroma in the specialty coffee store or, recall the evocative, exquisite scents of candles and carved wood at the gift shop.

If you have been doing your shopping online, though, your experience will have been quite different – efficient, yes; sensorially engaging, no. Things could change though with the sorts of olfactory – that's, smell – output devices being developed in research labs. So, you log onto the perfume store and as the graphics load, your computer pumps out an enchanting, enticing set of scents.

During the dot-com boom era, a few years ago, a US company attempted to take these types of technology mainstream; while the perhaps poorly named iSmell device failed to take-off, today there are many companies pursuing the vision (take a look at www.trisenx.com, for example).

And, its not just e-commerce applications that might be enhanced. Think about those boring beeps your calendar program produces, reminding you of upcoming appointments. Aromatic output might replace them to provide ambient, calmer prompts. If you need to collect the kids from crèche at 3.30, in the words of one MIT researcher, "...the aroma of baby powder wafts across the room at 3:00 p.m.as a gentle reminder of the upcoming appointment"

Actually, smelly websites, while appearing radical, are pretty dull in the light of work being done in London. In June, I met with Jenny Tillotson at Central St Martins, the art and design college. She's working with nanotechnologists – scientists who engineer products in extremely small scale - to realise her dream of computer controlled, scent producing garments.

"I envisage the fabric generating a localized 'scent bubble', providing aroma molecules for the right moment and the right effect, triggering new emotions and enhancing the intimate contact with other living things", she explained.

Tillotson's take on technology is far from geeky, her innovations inspired by nature and art rather than processors and pixels: "I often look to biology to see how animal and plant life interact and are structured. When I was working on a honey-type aroma output, I modeled the output device – the fabric – closely to honeycomb structures".

If she succeeds, the annual Christmas-do is going to get even more interesting, it seems. In the world of smart clothes, as Jenny pointed out, "...sensors in your

garments could be programmed to detect someone whose profile is of interest to you and send them a sample of your own pheromones. Love is literally in the air!”

This year, then, it’s the usual, “merry Christmas”; but, perhaps, in a while, we will all be familiar with the season of high-tech smelliness.