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FUTURES

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THE CREATOLOGY REPORT

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THE SENSORY INTERNET

THE NEW SENSORY LANDSCAPE OF TECH THAT LIVES, BREATHES, TALKS & READS OUR MINDS.

CONTENTS

EP1, The era of 'Her', Next-Mind, Image credit NextMind

INTERNET CONNECTIONS

The relationship between the internet and humans is becoming ever more blurred. Over the past decade, our online lives have told the story of social media bringing us closer to each other. We've spent more time online but, crucially, always drawn a clear line between the internet and real life, and the tech itself has played the role of facilitator rather than active participant.

These demarcations are shifting rapidly during the current pandemic, which has accelerated the need for the internet to transcend human connection in new ways, in the midst of people's isolation. New technologies such as AI (artificial intelligence) and AR (augmented reality) have come of age, paving the way for a more sensory, sentient and immersive internet that blurs the physical with the digital.

In this pandemic-induced "new normal" the internet itself has become a protagonist, interacting as much with us as we do with it. And our online universes are quickly switching from being distinct worlds to our entire world – or a version of it.

We're about to see an explosion of new sensory experiences created by technology. Brands are already exploring how they can use augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) to communicate in ways that engage all the senses, incorporating scent and tactility as never before.

EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions, Mercedes Vision AVTR, Image credit Mercedes-Benz/Daimler

HEY "SIRI"

With the phrase “Hey Siri” now ubiquitous in our homes, voice assistants are shaping up to play a central role in the next evolution of the internet, enabling us to use our voices for everything from navigating e-commerce transactions to communicating with our vehicles.

Sound is not only making the internet more accessible to everyone, it is also becoming even more integral to branding as brands embrace and experiment with ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) identities and sonic logos. Creatives will also be stepping up their sonic game and more energy and resources will be devoted to thoughtful use of soundscapes to create immersive, atmospheric storytelling.

Visual and neuro recognition will also be used to further transform the way we interact with the internet, interpreting our wants without the need to speak or type, our minds and facial expressions will do the talking for us.

HUMAN EXPERI-ENCE

Above all, the next phase of the internet will offer a more intelligent, human experience. We will spend more of our time with AI-powered robotics and avatars, some of which may look and communicate eerily like humans.

We may even think of them as friends and collaborators, or therapists and caregivers. In the bigger picture, our communities, towns and cities will truly be smarter, and more interconnected and intuitive than we've ever known.

EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions, Atmosphère collar, Image credit Seymourpowell

SOUND FIRST

EP1, Sound-first, Alexa wearables, Image credit Amazon.com, Inc

AI ACCES-SORIES

A major shift is under way in terms of how we interact with technology. As the rollout of 5G finally facilitates the full emergence of the Internet of Things, the original iterations of Amazon Echo and Google Home look like ancient history.

Amazon is forging on relentlessly towards a world where any device can be connected to Alexa, enabling voice-led control over everything from cooking appliances to your calendar. The company recently launched a collection of wearables – including earbuds, glasses and a ring – to perform different voice-controlled tasks, highlighting the potential for inanimate objects to come alive.

TALKING TO YOUR TECH // TALKING TO YOUR TECH // TALKING TO YOUR TECH

Talking with a product, even at a basic level, begins a journey of connection and intimacy above and beyond the flick of a switch.

Amazon's recently introduced Custom Interfaces enable more dynamic exchanges between consumers and a third-party device or object via an Alexa Skill. For example, an Alexa Skill can be harnessed to interact with an electronic keyboard, setting Alexa up as a music teacher to add a sensorial element to distanced learning, or with a game board to transform it into a more immersive experience.

Amazon teamed up with Lego in September 2019 to test out this evolving Alexa feature, with developers competing to craft voice-powered interactions with toy robots, such as making them dance. As we use voice control tech to manage our daily lives, audio will reshape the way brands communicate with us – and the way we communicate with them. The iconic start-up chimes from the likes of Apple, Windows, and HBO are blueprints for the kind of motifs that will become prevalent as brands increasingly invest in carving out sonic identities and stronger auditory cues in a world that talks and listens more, free from images.

Hearing these sonic logos will engender trust as we grow accustomed to using voice assistants to complete transactions or browse a brand's online spaces using only our ears. Mastercard and O2 are among the first companies to go down this route – in fact, Mastercard even launched a whole full-length album featuring original musical scores, incorporating musical notes from its sonic logo.

EP1, Sound-first, Wavepaths,
Image credit Wavepaths

Recent research by Wunderman Thompson has shown that interacting with sound, in comparison to text, engenders more emotional reactions from consumers, meaning that sound-based marketing represents a way to engage with consumers on new, more intimate levels.

Verbal technologies are also presenting ways to expand consumer audiences by transcending the need for literacy or use of keyboards. Google voice tech can already translate over 100 languages and dialects. From the elderly to those in rural India, consumers previously locked out of internet usage suddenly become accessible.

There are many niches in the dating industry, but all of them are still focused on judging someone based on a picture and a few sentences.

Sacha Nasan

Founder of dating app Blindlee // Cult Futures Interview

EP1, Sound-first, Wavepaths,
Image credit Wavepaths

COCOONS OF SOUND

Technology has increased the ability for these sound-first interactions to become more personalised and intuitive. In a therapeutic setting, Wavepaths matches up musical notes and rhythms with a person's breathing to create "a soothing cocoon of sound," while Berlin-based Endel uses AI to create generative soundscapes to help people sleep, paving the way for brands in the sleep and wellbeing economy – from mattresses to lighting to furniture – to engage with customers on a deeper level. Even in online dating, innovators are toying with sound as the first interaction. When Sacha Nasan founded dating app Blindlee, he traded swiping for calling, giving users an opportunity to chat first via a blurred video call to see if they were a match.

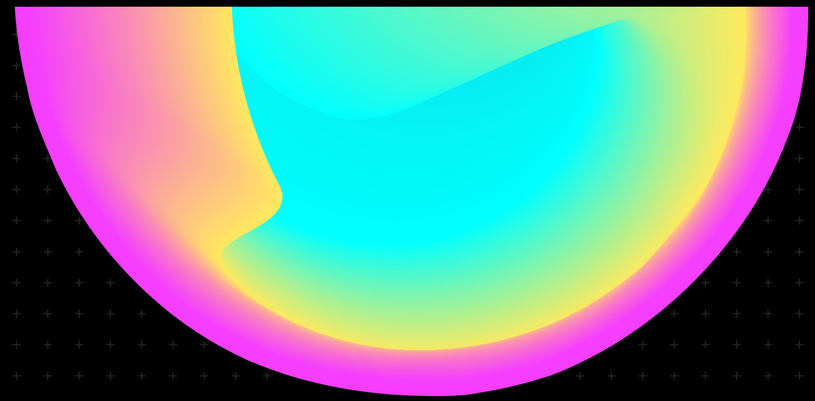
"There are so many different niches in the dating industry, but all of them essentially are still focused on judging someone based on a picture and a few sentences," Nasan tells Cult. "And I think that's what people are getting tired of. Voice is one of the main aspects that are part of judging one's personality without just looking at pictures."

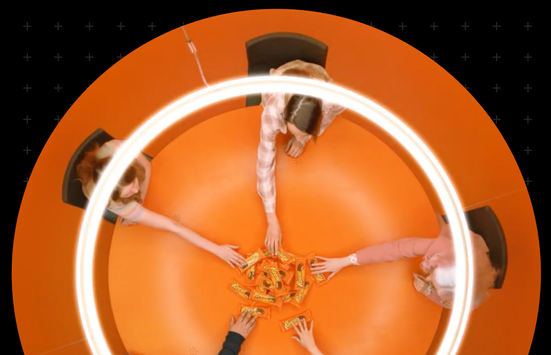
BRANDED TINGLES

EP1, Brand tingling, Reese The Movie,
Image credit Hershey Canada

VIRTUAL BRAIN TINGLES // VIRTUAL BRAIN TINGLES // VIRTUAL BRAIN TINGLES // VIRTUAL BRAIN TINGLES //

As countless events
have been cancelled due to the
pandemic, brands are seeing that emotion and
immersion don't just have to come from traditional art
or lavish activations such as catwalk fashion shows – they
can come from digital technology that allows us to virtually feel
and experience the sensory details of a product without visiting a
store. ASMR is one such virtual yet tactile emotional marketing tool
that brands are increasingly embracing, as many listeners and viewers
report literally feeling a response in their spine. The sensation caused by
hyper-gentle tapping, whispering, and crinkling has gained momentum over
the past year as a therapeutic medium for YouTubers, with the auditory and
tactile stimuli known to cause pleasantly soothing "brain tingles".





ASM-AHHHH

For the Pokémon Company, ASMR activations have recently come to mean a series of short videos featuring the blob-like Grimer character gliding over a variety of surfaces, with merit-worthy audio denoting its every plop and wiggle.

Lush has attracted dozens of ASMR artists and brand fans posting videos of its products in action, from bubbling bath bombs and running water to crinkling packaging and the sound of a knife slicing through soaps, designed to provide another dimension of wellness and relaxation for listeners.

The spread of ASMR is also provoking a new wave of sensory-first innovation in other areas beside video and audio.

EP1, Branded tingling, Walking Grimer, Image credit Pokémon company

New York-based design agency Vault49 recently created what it called the first ASMR-inspired logo for media brand So Satisfying, dropping both an elasticised animated version and a stretchy static one.

Kendall Jenner's oral care brand Moon applied the ASMR concept to its very product design, releasing Poppin Breath Mints that nod to the crackling, tingling sensations of Pop Rocks candy. And female artist Sian Fan used ASMR as the main draw for her interactive art piece, produced in conjunction with the Phoenix Cinema and Art Centre in Leicester, UK.

The online, almost game-like environment invites participants to "unwind and disconnect" by using their computer arrow keys, mouse, and space bar to navigate an ethereal pink landscape – which the artist calls a "virtual sanctuary" – and discover digital objects that trigger ASMR.

ACOUSTIC JOURNEYS

A sound will either make you get excited, feel trust, feel at ease or feel tense And that’s going to be a big part of how a brand positions itself.

Scott Newman

On Air Fest founder // Cult Futures Interview

EP1, Acoustic journeys, The Con, Image credit On Air Fest

SONIC BRANDING

"A sound will either make you get excited, feel trust, feel at ease or feel tense," On Air Fest founder Scott Newman tells Cult. "And that's going to be a big part of how a brand positions itself.

Sonic branding, just like visual branding, is all story based, and the brands that can understand how to create trust, but also take people into their world and bring them along on a journey are the ones that are going to succeed."

Newman worked with Crimetown podcast host Zac Stuart-Pontier to craft The Con, an audio-based immersive storytelling experience that takes listeners through four different locations within the historical Wythe Hotel in Brooklyn, New York.

The noir crime audio drama is Newman and Stuart-Pontier's attempt to "use storytelling, technology and sound to create experiences, not just digital content." Could geo-located audio be the next generation of product placement? "I think there's a really interesting opportunity to have location-based storytelling," Stuart-Pontier tells Cult, adding that brands can connect with consumers with sounds that are triggered in particular spots – in the parks in New York City, for example.

SOPHISTICATED SOUND WAVES

New creative applications of sound and advances in technology are already creating richer opportunities for urban immersion. In one project for Experiments with Google, AI musical artist Nao Tokui created soundscapes for Google Street View using advanced image recognition and a deep learning model.

At MONOM, a 4D sound venue in Berlin, audience members can enjoy “sound holograms” – audio that appears to move through and around them thanks to spatial sound equipment. “In our culture, I think audio often takes a back seat to our visual sense,” William Russell, creative director at MONOM, told A/D/O by Mini’s The Journal. “I was getting bored of going to see artists play at music venues that didn’t consider the acoustics of the space, so I started looking for a new way to produce that would be immersive enough to bring people back into the state of considering sound.”

Sound sophistication has moved into the mainstream with high-end cinemas and concert venues, but as department and signature stores look to create a destination wow-factor experience to tempt customers to visit, it won’t be long before sound starts playing a role in real-world fashion and beauty retail too, such as recreating interactive virtual fashion shows and photo shoots in store.

Experiments with Google, AI musical artist
Nao Tokui, Image courtesy Nao Tokui

NEW INTERFACE

TACTILE INTER-FACES

If Lululemon's multi-million-dollar investment in interactive fitness start-up Mirror late last year foreshadows anything, it's that emerging technologies are paving the way for novel cross-overs, as well as new interfaces with sensory components.

For London studio Seymourpowell, this means innovation in the beauty industry, with devices that bring together technology, furniture design and hardware, building on next-gen, AI-powered beauty and skincare apps.

"We're seeing more and more that these digital platforms are needing the physical to create more meaningful, richer experiences," says Robert Cooper, designer at Seymourpowell. At the same time, "it's very hard for the physical world to match the kind of bespoke nature that digital technology can provide so that users get a very flexible experience," he explains.

EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions, Élever makeup printer, Image credit Seymourpowell

EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions, Élever makeup printer, Image credit Seymourpowell

INTELLIGENT RETAIL SPACES

The studio's futuristic solution is Atmosphere, which features a conceptual, elegantly designed collar that harnesses data from the immediate environment to diffuse personalised, anti-pollution skincare around the wearer.

It also comes in the form of a chaise longue, as Seymourpowell imagines a way a furniture brand might cross into a new category to tap into the beauty and wellness space. Although a connected sofa experience might seem a way off from reality now, it might become more prevalent as all objects become "smart" to some degree. With Seymourpowell's Élever make-up printer, beauty routines and products are reconceptualised as part of a "shazam" production line, where instantaneous and viral aspects of social media are applied in real life. What if a customer could see a make-up look from their favourite influencer and apply it to themselves immediately – without having to purchase all of the products and laboriously learn the process? Élever, which features product cartridges and facial recognition technology, makes that possible, pointing to a future that challenges the established, traditional manufacturing systems of make-up brands.

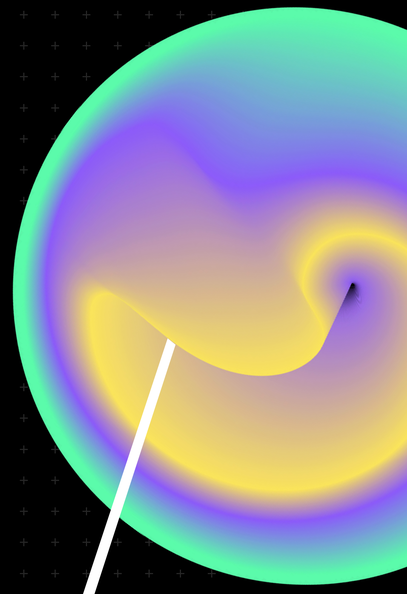
EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions,
Mercedes Vision AVTR, Image credit Mercedes-Benz/Daimler

SENSORIAL WELLBEING

Mercedes-Benz is imagining what this sensorial future looks like in a car, in order to provide its customers with more memorable experiences and improve wellbeing at the wheel.

At CES 2020, the German automaker unveiled Vision AVTR, the latest in its Vision series of concept cars, created in collaboration with James Cameron's Avatar production team. The car is started with the driver's handprint and is able to verify the driver's identity by checking their breathing or heartbeat. Passengers are soothed by vibrations from the seats, which are inspired by the leaf hammocks from Avatar.

Each journey in the Mercedes AVTR can be soundtracked with relaxing recordings from nature, as the car draws passengers' attention to places of interest along the way.



EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions,
Mercedes Vision AVTR, Image credit Mercedes-Benz/Daimler

EP1, New interfaces and instantaneous interactions,
Mercedes Vision AVTR, Image credit Mercedes-Benz/Daimler

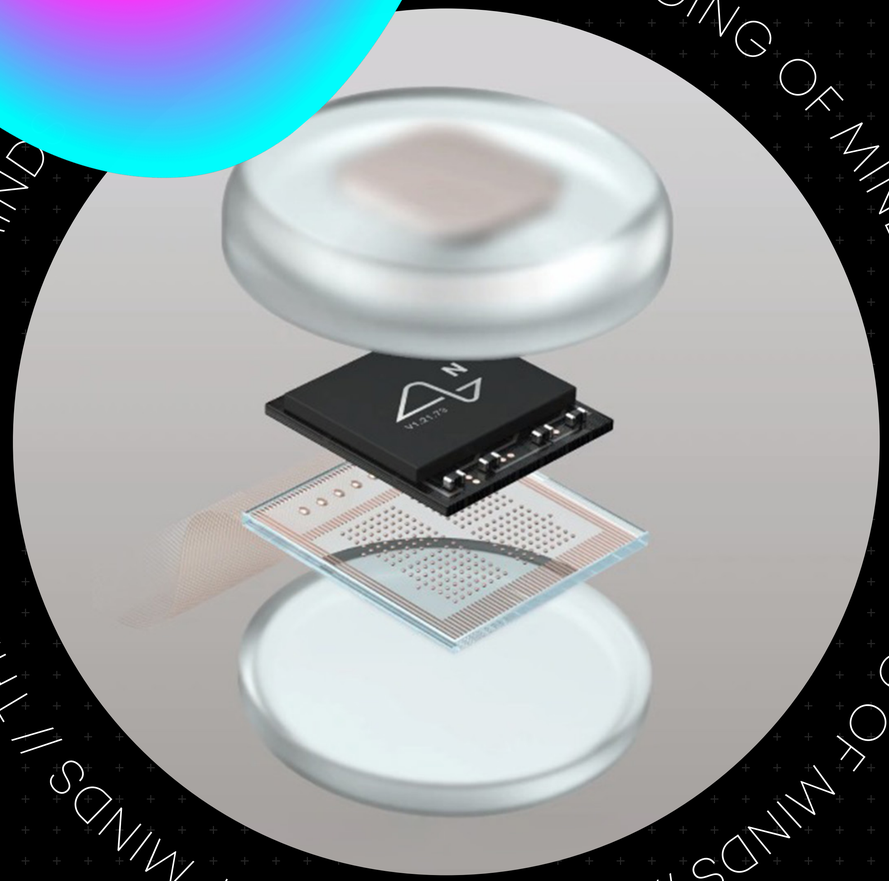
THE ERA OF HER

EP1, The era of 'Her', Neural Mirror, Image credit Cristina Vatielli for Ultravioletto

BRING-ING HER TO LIFE

The next phase of devices and interfaces will be capable of communicating, learning and forming memories based on their interactions with their human companions, and Samsung subsidiary STAR Labs' Neon avatar project is among those leading the way.

Neon was announced at CES 2020, heralding a future that brings the premise of the 2013 Scarlett Johansson movie Her to life. However, Neon aims to go a step further than the movie's Siri-type avatar.Using a synthesis of verbal recognition, AI and animation, Neon is hyping its creations as "artificial humans" rather than mere holograms, promoting their potential not only as assistants, but also as caretakers for the elderly or ill, helping to combat loneliness and isolation.



EP1, The era of 'Her', Neuralink chip, Image credit Neuralink

Elon Musk envisions a future where AI enhances the capability of the human brain itself. The Tesla founder says the first Neuralink chip, linking the brain to a computer, could be implanted in a human by the end of 2020, initially having transformative benefits for people with neurological conditions. Musk believes that, longer term, it could be more broadly applied to allow humans to keep pace with AI.

Technology is also learning to read our minds, as NextMind demonstrated at CES 2020. NextMind showcased a headset that reads the brain's decision-making processes to generate commands that can be transmitted to devices. The demo allowed users to control settings on a lamp or TV simply through the power of thought.

We're already seeing creative applications of this, Italian creative studio Ultravioletto's Neural Mirror installation used facial recognition technology to harness AI's power to interpret and express how it sees the world around it.

The installation, displayed in a disused church at Spoleto's Festival of Two Worlds last summer, appeared to function like a normal mirror. However, as each visitor observed their own reflection, facial recognition technology analysed their demographics and emotions.

A screen then displayed an AI-generated interpretation of the viewer, replacing their true reflection with a digital likeness and generating colours and shapes based on the data received.

EP1, The era of 'her', A Space for Being exhibition, Image credit Muuto

EMO-TIONAL DESIGN

Brands are also learning how to use sensory recognition technology to evaluate our responses to different experiences and inform their design. Google's A Space For Being exhibition at Milan Design Week last year explored the influence of design on emotions and wellbeing, signposting a future of neuroaesthetics-informed design.

Before entering the exhibition's three interiors, visitors were fitted with wristbands that measured their responses to each room's design, generating a report detailing which room had made the visitor feel most comfortable.

EP1, The era of 'her', A Space for Being exhibition, Image credit Muuto

TACTILE T&CH

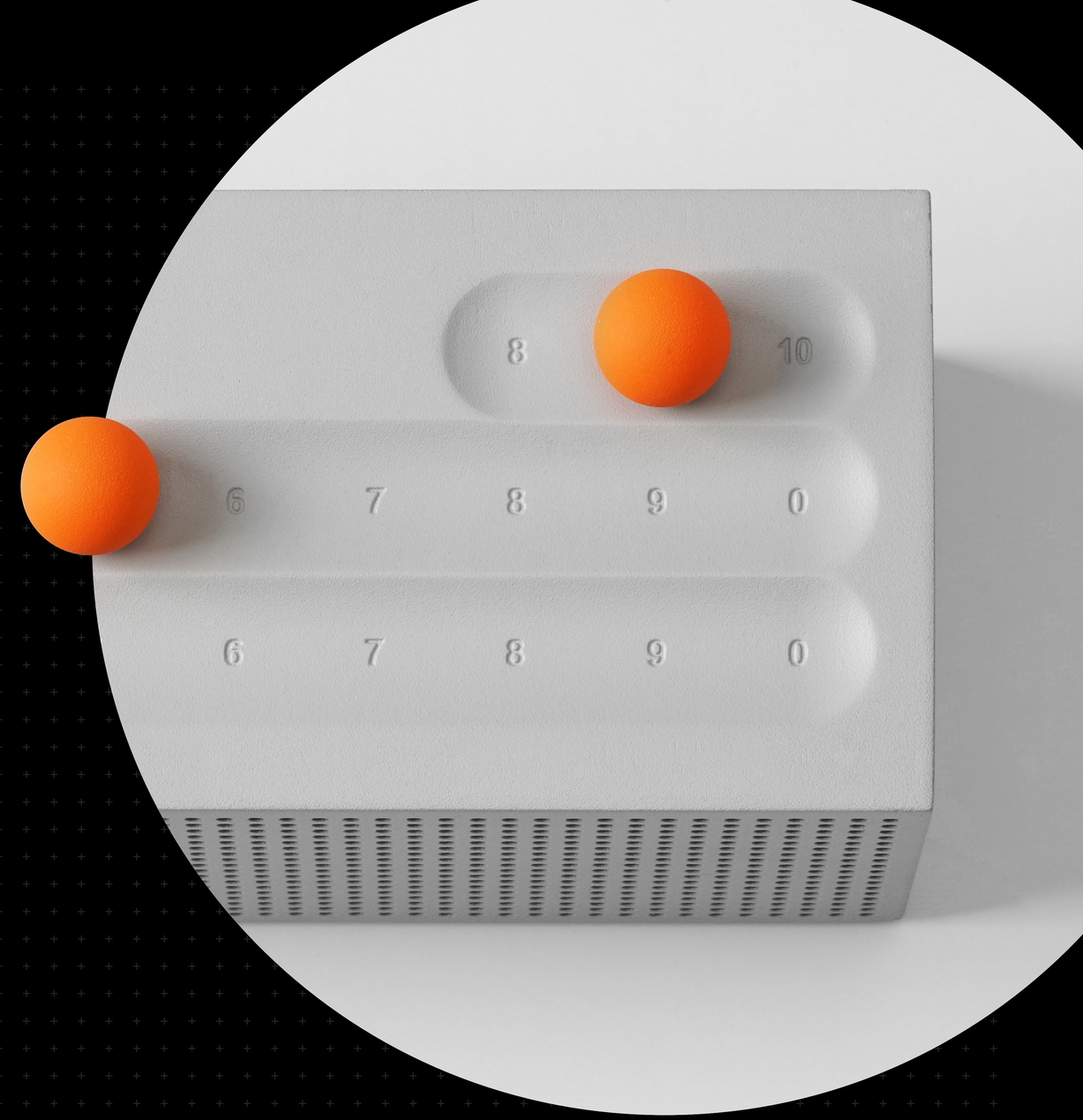
EP1, Tactile Tech, SF-SO,
Image credit SF-SO

INTUITIVE TECHNOLOGY

Even as the pandemic brings about an increased desire to reduce tactility and invest more in contactless interactions, the material and physical have historically been as important as the aural and visual in this sensory world.

As face and voice prints increasingly replace screens and keypads, designers are reimagining how consumers will interact with everyday gadgets. San Francisco and Seoul-based studio SF-SO puts the tactile experience back in digitally powered objects, such as Bluetooth speakers and smart door locks, by assigning them a single, simple analogue feature – with users rotating a knob, for example, or turning an object on its side. The Paper Phone app from the Special Projects studio turns entirely digital transactions, like Google mapping a destination or looking up a recipe online, into a single A4 printout that users can then fold into a pocket-sized booklet.

More examples are sure to come as, by necessity, we seek to minimise and distance interactions. New devices and wearables will seek to intuitively read or interpret responses (or data points) rather than require us to enter information into portals.



TACTILE EXPER-IENCES

Will people be hungry for greater interaction and touch contact after having been forcibly deprived of it? Seymourpowell believes that, at the very least, tactility can enrich an increasingly digital world.

While the current circumstances mean the beauty industry is relying more heavily on AR make-up apps and online shopping, thoughtful, tangible design can lend dimension to an experience – Seymourpowell's conceptual Élever make-up printer is embellished with soft fabrics and a terrazzo base to "maintain the ritual and glamour of applying make-up in the mirror," says Cooper.

EP1, Tactile Tech, Samsung Galaxy Z flip smartphone, Image credit Samsung

Even the big tech companies are bringing the palpable experiences of yesteryear into new apparatuses, from Samsung's Galaxy Z Flip smartphones, which incorporate foldable glass, to the Project Rumble Pak experiment for Netflix Hack Day 2019.

The mobile app harks back to the days of the Nintendo 64 games console by providing viewers with haptic feedback in sync with the action-packed show they're watching.

LEARNINGS

Alexa wearables, Image credit Amazon.com, Inc //
Reese The Movie, Image credit Hershey Canada

02

Now that voice is so enmeshed in day-to-day consumer habits, brands and creatives are exploring its unique impact on the subconscious and using sound to provoke emotional and sensory responses.

01

In a very short time, consumers have become comfortable using voice-activated technologies and assistants as a default. Sound has also become an integral medium for entertainment and interactions with brands. This is prompting brands to conceive sonic-first strategies.

03

Brands, innovators and creatives are starting to see our interactions with technology in a more holistic way – looking at colour, touch, and sound collectively to design new experiences with consumers.

04

AI and mixed-reality formats are creating a new era for smart assistants and our interaction with the internet – one where we will be able to converse with Alexa as a virtual human.

Élever makeup printer, Image credit Seymourpowell // SF-SO, Image credit SF-SO

05

Historically, our interactions with technology have been about wilfully sharing information or instructions. New technologies, focused on interpreting and reading our minds, are starting to react to the subconscious.

CASE STUDIES

01

“Zzzomnia” by Jung von Matt for Mey, with Facebook

Improved and emerging technologies are empowering brands to communicate with highly targeted demographics by engaging the senses and eliciting an emotional or physiological response. German sleepwear brand Mey’s “Zzzomnia” campaign took a creative approach to addressing sleep-deprived consumers, creating “the first ad designed to make you sleep.”

Working with agency Jung von Matt, Mey used a Facebook playable ad to create a gamified approach to tackling insomnia. The ad displays a series of dynamic psychedelic patterns, which research suggests reduce stress and relax the brain. The viewer uses their touchscreen to trace the movements of the patterns and either move on to the next level or fall asleep, as the game induces the body’s sleep triggers. Intelligent use of data and targeting enhances the ad’s potency, with Mey serving the spot to people scrolling on mobile devices between midnight and 5am.

EP1, Case Studies, 1. Zzzomnia by Jung von Matt for Mey with Facebook, Image credit Jung von Matt

02

EP1, Case Studies, Ada sculpture Jenny Sabin,
Image credit Jake Knapp courtesy of Jenny Sabin

ADA by Jenny Sabin, artist in residence at Microsoft, Redmon campus, Washington.

The growing sophistication of AI technologies is paving the way for creative experiences that are responsive to the emotions and actions of the protagonist. Architectural designer Jenny Sabin's ADA sculpture installation for Microsoft's Redmond campus reflects the emotions of people in the vicinity by emitting a colourful variety of shifting patterns and pulsating lights.

Inspired by mathematician Ada Lovelace, ADA is a pavilion-style web of fibreglass and photoluminescent fibres. Cameras placed around ADA use facial recognition technology to discern how passers-by are feeling. ADA then responds to that data accordingly, "smiling back" at the viewer. In this way, the audience is also the muse – the art reflects the audience, revealing the collaborative interplay between humans and technology.

EP1, Case Studies, Ada sculpture Jenny Sabin,
Image credit John Brecher courtesy of Jenny Sabin

03

Kórsafn by Björk in collaboration with Microsoft for Sister City, New York.

Sister City hotel in New York, traded more traditional soundtracks in its lobby in favour of a generative score, compiled in collaboration with Microsoft AI and singer-songwriter Björk.

Called Kórsafn, the choral soundscapes transform throughout the day in response to activity on the hotel roof – cameras detect passing birds, changing weather and barometric pressure, informing which piece of music to play.

Kórsafn by Björk in collaboration with Microsoft for Sister City, New York. Image courtesy of Sister City

To book a private viewing or for more information about Futures please get in contact.

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