

# Was It Virtually Good for You?

**Sex:** The best lovemaking of your life is just a few nanobots and a bodysuit away. **By Yahlin Chang**

**I**N THE NEXT CENTURY YOU'RE going to have better sex than you've ever had before. You won't have a single sexual fantasy that will go unfulfilled. If it's as obvious as uncorseting a virtual Gwyneth Paltrow as she murmurs sweet British nothings in your ear, you won't even have to wait very long. But you will have to be willing to step into the strange new world of virtual reality. By some counts, it'll take just two decades to perfect the all-enveloping, visual-auditory-tactile virtual environment. In virtual sex, you could change genders—you could feel what it's like to be Gwyneth Paltrow. You could turn your lover into someone else, without her or his even knowing it. Of course, she or he could be doing the same to you.

All the communication technologies we've ever invented—the telephone, movies, the Internet—have eventually been used in the service of lust. Tomorrow's advanced technologies will be no different. Your husband might be on a business trip 3,000 miles away, but your virtual bodies could still embrace in a virtual bed—and why stop there? Why not, as inventor Ray Kurzweil suggests, rendezvous on a virtual Mediterranean beach or take a sunset stroll along the Seine? You could change shape, even species; you could have sex in a virtual environment that defies the laws of physics.

"You could both become dinosaurs or octopi," says Jaron Lanier, considered the inventor of virtual reality. "People could become giant mountain ranges and cause earthquakes, and experience thousands of years going by in a single orgasm."

It wouldn't feel that great with a clunky VR headset strapped on and all that tangled wiring. But in a decade or two we should be able to throw on a special bodysuit and walk into a virtual-sex booth. And then by 2029, predicts Kurzweil, the nanotechnology that

exists today will have produced nanobots—intelligent, microscopic, self-replicating robots wirelessly hooked into the World Wide Web. After being swallowed or injected, nanobots will take up residence in the capillaries of our brains and will provide us with completely convincing, all-encompassing

virtual environments. Late in the next century, Lanier predicts, all the building materials that make up the regular world—the walls, your bed—will consist of swarms of nanobots. So if you wanted to envision, say, your high-school crush in your bedroom, the nanobots in the walls would produce waves of light and sound and patterns of pressure that would reproduce his shape, smell and feel—for you to have your way with.

Virtual sex is risk-free, with no chance of AIDS or pregnancy. Fidelity and monogamy will have to be completely redefined. Is it cheating if you have virtual sex with another person? What about virtual intercourse with a virtual person who has no real-world counterpart? What if you have sex with your partner but you've adjusted her virtual image so that she looks just like your ex-girlfriend, or that woman in your office?

By that time computers are supposed to be so astoundingly intelligent they'll be able to answer these questions. MIT professor Ted Selker believes that computers will help us "debug our relationships" and even choose our mates. "I strongly believe that my computer will make better decisions than I can about whom I should be with," he says. "My computer watches everything I do, what I browse, the e-mail I send, the dates I schedule, and gets a better and better idea of what works and what doesn't."

But it's not hard to envision the terrifying misuses. "The first company to isolate and decode the pleasure molecule could patent it and become the new Bill Gates," says Lanier, "so that every time anyone has an orgasm they have to pay him 50 cents." Perhaps instead of sex we'll tap directly into our brains' pleasure centers, and find emotional intimacy by virtually experiencing each other's dreams. Our prediction: in time, we'll get tired of pretending to be elephants in heat, and real-world, down-and-dirty sex will have become so exotic, it'll seem downright... sexy. ■



**FANTASIES UNLIMITED:** Whether in 'Barbarella' (left) or 'Lawnmower Man,' we've always used technology to serve our lust