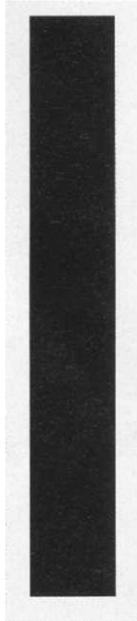


STEVEN LEVY

A Dying Breed

The desktop mouse might be headed for extinction. But don't tell Apple that.



Is it possible for a computer mouse to be cool? Ever since Douglas Engelbart invented the pointing device in 1963 as part of his shockingly perspicacious Human Augmentation Project, mice have all been pretty much the same. Slide one to move the pointer on the screen. Click the buttons to select things. But these days, as more and more of us are using laptops rather than desktops, the mouse has become an endangered species. Trackpads, after all, can do everything a mouse can—and more. With a Mac trackpad, you can now employ a wide range of finger motions to scroll through documents, tab between open applications, and zoom in and out of photos. And a new wave of touchscreen computers lets you manipulate things directly, like you're already doing with your smartphone. So, why even bother with a mouse? It's a question that Apple has obviously been pondering. In October, with characteristic suddenness, the company introduced a radically reimagined device called the Magic Mouse. Clearly, it's intended to revivify the flagging fortunes of the species, and it just might do that—for a while.

Foto

As one might expect in this Bluetooth age, the \$69 mouse is wireless. It's carefully designed, with a sumptuously cantilevered icy-white carapace over a brushed aluminum hull. And, like other recent Apple designs, the contour is unbroken by any raised button—the device itself is the button.

The real advance, however, is that the Magic Mouse is touch sensitive, so it supports the same sorts of gestures that a trackpad or iPhone does, including one I cannot live without: the finger slide that scrolls the page up, down, or sideways. If you hold down the Control key, a finger on the mouse can enlarge or shrink the screen image. This is actually a better way to zoom than the pinch gesture, which is more effective on an iPhone than on a laptop touchpad. Absent, though, is the two-finger twist to rotate a photo. And forget about the four-finger swipe that lets you quickly switch between applications—how would you even try that without risking a wrist sprain?

Is the Magic Mouse the best mouse ever? Nothing superior comes to mind. If I had a Mac desktop, I would use it all the time. But since I have a laptop, I simply forget that the mouse is around; it's almost as easy, and certainly less complicated, just to use the trackpad. I feel no compulsion to pack the peripheral with me when I travel.

As long as desktops exist, it's nice to have a great mouse to use with them. But ultimately, we're going to be doing our pointing without devices—either by touching surfaces directly or gesturing air-guitar style as cameras interpret our movements. (Microsoft's upcoming game platform, Natal, is almost there already.) Or we'll just bark orders at voice-recognition-enabled machines. Either way, no amount of legerdemain will stop the computer mouse's inevitable scuttle down the long tail of oblivion.

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