

THE WEIRD AND THE WONDERFUL FROM CES

AUTONOMOUS LUGGAGE, A MACHINE FOR FOLDING CLOTHES, AND MORE

In January, editors from *IEEE Spectrum* hit the show floor at CES in Las Vegas. The show is perhaps best known for the gadgets that are unveiled each year by hopeful manufacturers. And while some people like to sneer at gadgets as the trivial amusements of a decadent society, many technologies that later came to be considered essential parts of modern life began their life as unnecessary technical baubles. For example, in 1970, the first consumer VCR prototype was unveiled at CES, a technology previously needed only by television studios.

So I defend the gadget as a worthy object of inquiry and consequently spent a fair amount of my time at CES looking for interesting examples, particularly from smaller companies and startups. Here are my personal nominations for this year's weird and wonderful, in no particular order.

HUSHME

Winner of the “gadget that looks most like a prop from a dystopian science fiction movie” award, the Hushme is designed to solve a problem endemic to today's crowded spaces and open offices—having to listen to people's phone conversations (or conversely, having other people eavesdropping on your private conversation). The Hushme is an earphone-equipped mask that you snap around your mouth. A microphone inside the mask transmits your voice to your phone, while the mask blocks the sound of your voice from being overheard by those nearby. It's going into mass production in April, but you can preorder it now for US \$179.

GEMINI PDA

This product from Planet Computers should never exist, according to conventional wisdom. It has two strikes against it: First, it is a

PDA, a product category long since swallowed up by smartphones. Second, it has a clamshell design, an approach largely discarded in the touch-screen era. But the Gemini has proved surprisingly popular among a certain set of techies who like it for two main reasons: They want to be able to use a real keyboard without having to carry a separate item, and they also appreciate that the PDA can dual boot into either Android or Linux, which lets them use it as an actual computer, not just a locked-down interface for apps or websites. The Gemini was wildly popular when it launched on Indiegogo, and it will go on sale to the general public at \$500 for a Wi-Fi only version and \$600 for a 4G-enabled version.

FOLDIMATE

The FoldiMate is a refrigerator-size machine that folds clothes. And that's it. But it was enough to make it—by far—the most popular item I tweeted about at CES, with opinion running toward the “shut up and take my money” point of view, although a significant fraction of responders thought it the ultimate in laziness. The version demoed at the show was a partially working prototype, but the FoldiMate crew hopes to start shipping units in late 2019 for \$980.

PROSTHESIS

Okay, this last one is stretching the definition of “gadget” to the breaking point, but it is still a device intended to be used by an individual, and it was on the CES show floor—albeit looming down over us. Prosthesis is a real-life mech or mecha, a type of giant piloted robot that dominates an en-



tire subgenre of science fiction. The lithium-battery-powered Prosthesis was built by the robotics division of Furrion and is intended to explore the potential of exoskeleton technology (think the power loader seen in *Aliens*). Furrion hopes that Prosthesis could be used as the basis for a mech racing league, which will sound either utterly awesome or utterly insane to you, depending on your taste in science fiction. So this last entry is up to you: Do you think this was the best gadget at CES, or the craziest? —STEPHEN CASS

An extended version of this article appears in our Tech Talk blog.

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