Internet eyewear much in view at CES trade fair

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Jeff Boleman tries the Epson Moverio BT-200 smart glasses, which projects two identical 16:9 images onto the lens-based screens, at the 2014 International CES in Las Vegas, Nevada, January 7, 2014

While many of the digital glitterati thronging this week's Consumer Electronics Show were wearing Google's new Internet glasses, rival online eyewear products abounded among the trade stands.

US-based Vuzix showed off what it billed as the first commercially available "smart glasses," an Android-powered monocle-style device with a high-resolution camera.

It can be connected to smartphones or wireless Internet hotspots and display Internet data directly in front of a user's eye.

"We are targeting it toward the industrial space, like people in a warehouse who need to pick up packages," Mike Hallett of Vuzix told AFP, while showing off the eyewear at CES.

"The camera on the front could scan bar codes, then tell the person where to find the packages," he continued. "We are in the airline and medical industries with a lot of applications."

Vuzix wants to cross into the consumer market with applications to enable the devices to check email or translate written languages.

"If you are in Japan and don't speak or read Japanese, it can translate the signs for you and help you get around based on GPS coordinates, right in front of your eye instead of having to look down at the phone," Hallett said of the eyepiece, priced at $1,000.

Vuzix also showed of a new model, which was basically a set of over-the-ear headphones with a visor-like video display that tilted up or down as desired.

"It's a huge, immersive experience," Hallett said. "People on the go who want a big screen on trains or planes; gamers, or even in the office instead of a monitor on your desk."

The eyewear was expected to be priced in the $500 to $800 range when Vuzix releases them later this year.

A history of smart eyewear on display at CES showed gadgets dating back to 1987.

"Check out 2002, it looks like you have a buzz-saw on your head," quipped Rhys Filmer of OrCam, an Israel-based company behind the display and a device to provide sight to the visually impaired.

"A lot of it back then was for the army."

In 2007 eyewear looking like upside-down sunglasses debuted and were used on flights to give first-class passengers immersive movie viewing, according to the timeline on display.

"Our device is more remedial, specifically for people with low-vision or legally blind," Filmer said.

The OrCam mini camera clips to eyeglass frames and has a bone-conduction speaker that presses against a wearer's temple.

It lets a person point to what they want read, whether in a book or newspaper or on a street sign or approaching bus, and then treats that as a starting point to begin speaking the words.

The OrCam device should hit the market in about six months at a price of $2,500, according to Filmer.

"All of this technology is going to help you function and be more independent," Filmer said of the trend in building computing power into eyewear.

"Instead of pulling out your phone, what you want is going to be showing up in your glasses. It is going to be helpful for everything you want to accomplish in your day."

Last month, Google announced updates to the software in its Internet-linked Glass eyewear to allow users to snap pictures by winking.

The new feature, which promises to escalate privacy concerns already being voiced about the high-tech gadget, came as one of an array of improvements.

Updates included letting owners lock eyewear so it can't be used unless a person knows the right "handshake" of swipes and taps.

"Glassware" code powering the eyewear was also modified to upload video directly to Google-owned video-sharing venue YouTube.

"Glass is about helping you look up and experience the world around you without getting bogged down by technology," Google said.

The high-tech accoutrement lets wearers take pictures, record video, send messages or perform other tasks with touch controls or by speaking commands.

It connects to the Internet using Wi-Fi hot spots or being wirelessly tethered to mobile phones.

Facebook, Twitter and news organizations have already tailored applications for Glass, which has so far only been made available to developers and a limited selection of "explorers" who paid $1,500 each for the eyewear.

Google has not announced a public release date for Google Glass but speculation centers around early this year.