Google redesigns Android to power smartwatches (Update)

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Google thinks it's time for an Internet-connected watch that performs many of the same tasks as a smartphone but with fewer distractions and rude interruptions.

The Internet's most influential company is trying to unleash a new era in

mobile computing with a version of its Android software tailored for high-tech watches and other devices that can be worn instead of held.

The "Android Wear" operating system released Tuesday is an altered version of Google's popular software that powers more than 1 billion of the world's smartphones and tablets. The new software will run on an array of so-called smartwatches scheduled to be released later this year.

The Android watches will be less conspicuous—and perhaps less obnoxious—than Google Glass, the high-tech headwear that includes a small camera and thumbnail-sized display screen attach to frames that look like a pair of spectacles.

Google so far has only sold the $1,500 Glass device to a limited number of people known as "explorers." Some of those early Glass adopters have been mocked as goofy-looking geeks while others have been ridiculed and scorned for being able to take video and photos surreptitiously without the consent of those around them.

Like Glass and smartphones running on other versions of the software, the Android watches will respond to voice commands such as "Ok Google" to play a specific song, send a text or make a restaurant reservation. It will also feature a virtual assistant, called Google Now, to learn a user's routines and preference so it can automatically show important information that can be seen with a quick look at the wrist.

Google is already trying to create more uses for Android watches by making the software available to computer programmers interested in making apps for the software.

Cultivating more applications will be crucial because smartwatches probably may never become the main device that people use to help manage their lives, said Gartner analyst Brian Blau. That means

consumers are going to have to see more compelling features to be persuaded to spend another $100 or $200 for a complementary device to a smartphone or tablet.

"Fashion is a big industry, but selling these watches will be more of challenge," Blau predicted. "We still need to see what kind of cool apps there will be and what kind of new behaviors they will enable."

The first Android watch may come from Motorola Mobility, a Google subsidiary that is in the process of being sold to Lenovo Group. Motorola already has built a prototype of its Android watch, called "Moto 360," that will go on sale this summer. No details on pricing were announced.

LG Electronics, a frequent Google partner in the smartphone and tablet markets, and fashion accessory maker Fossil Group also say they will share more details about their Android watches in the coming months. Other device makers working on Android watches include Asus, HTC and Samsung Electronics, according to Google.

Those companies will likely be competing against a highly anticipated smartwatch from iPhone maker Apple Inc. that is expected to be unveiled later this year. True to its secretive nature, Apple hasn't confirmed any plans to add a watch to its product line, although CEO Tim Cook has left little doubt he is intrigued by the concept.

There are already several other smartwatches on the market, including a recently released timepiece from Samsung that runs on that company's own operating system.

So far, those watches have proven to be novelties that primarily appeal to gadget-loving geeks and physical fitness enthusiasts looking for more tools to help track their workouts and general health.

Google's new take on Android may help cultivate more mainstream appeal for smartwatches. The software already is the most popular smartphone operating system in the world with a 79 percent share of the market, according to the research firm International Data Corp. Apple's iOS software ranks second with a 15 percent market share, so that company's entrance into the smartwatch category would also help spur more innovation in the category.

Smartwatches and Google Glass are just two of the first examples of how computing devices increasingly are expected to become like appendages to the human body as technology advances and connecting to the Internet becomes as reflexive as breathing. Google executives have even openly talked about day when it might be possible to help people live longer and more enjoyable lives by planting chips in their heads or under their skin.

"The possibilities with devices that you wear on your body are endless," David Singleton, an Android director of engineering, said in an online video posted Tuesday.

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