

Review: Uneasy first steps with Google Glass

March 15 2014, by Barbara Ortutay



In this Jan. 31, 2014 photo taken using Google Glass, vehicles are stopped at a traffic light in New York. (AP Photo/Barbara Ortutay)

Shaped like a lopsided headband, Google Glass is an unassuming piece of technology when you're holding it in your hands. You feel as if you can almost break it, testing its flexibility. Putting it on, though, is another story.

Once you do, this Internet-connected eyewear takes on a life of its own.

You become "The Person Wearing Google Glass" and all the assumptions that brings with it —about your wealth, boorishness or curiosity. Such is the fate of early adopters of new technologies, whether it's the Sony Walkman, the first iPod with its conspicuous white earbuds, or the Segway scooter. Google calls the people who wear Glass "explorers," because the device is not yet available to the general public.

With its \$1,500 price tag, the device is far from having mass appeal. At the South By Southwest Interactive tech jamboree in Austin this week, I counted fewer than a dozen people wearing it, including technology blogger Robert Scoble, who isn't shy about posting pictures of himself in the shower, red-faced, water running, wearing the device.

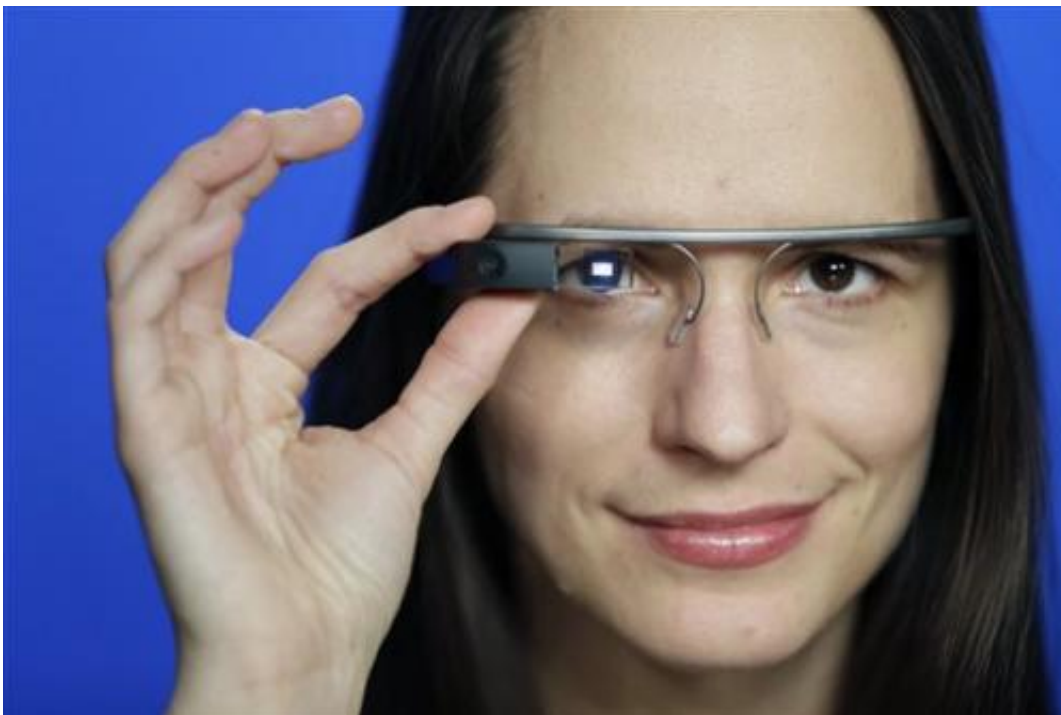
Google, like most successful technology companies, dreamers and inventors, likes to take a long view on things. It calls some of its most outlandish projects "moonshots." Besides Glass, these include its driverless car, balloons that deliver Internet service to remote parts of the world and contact lenses that monitor glucose levels in diabetics.

There's an inherent risk in moonshots, however: What if you never reach the moon? Ten years from now, we may look back at Google Glass as one of those short-lived bridges that takes us from one technological breakthrough to the next, just as pagers, MP3 players and [personal digital assistants](#) paved the way for the era of the smartphone. Fitness bands, too, may fit into this category.

In its current, early version, Google Glass feels bulky on my face and when I look in the mirror I see a futuristic telemarketer looking back at me. Wearing it on the subway while a homeless man shuffled through the car begging for change made me feel as if I was sporting a diamond tiara. I sank lower in my seat as he passed. If Google is aiming for mass appeal, the next versions of Glass have to be much smaller and less conspicuous.

Though no one knows for sure where wearable devices will lead us, Rodrigo Martinez, life sciences chief strategist at the Silicon Valley design firm IDEO, has some ideas. "The reason we are talking about wearables is because we are not at implantables yet," he says. "(But) I'm ready. Others are ready."

Nevermind implants, I'm not sure I'm even ready for Google Glass.



In this Feb. 21, 2014 file photo, Associated Press Technology Writer Barbara Ortutay poses wearing Google Glass in New York. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File)

Specs in place for the first time, I walked out of Google's Manhattan showroom on a recent Friday afternoon with a sense of unease. A wave of questions washed over me. Why is everyone looking at me? Should I be looking at them? Should I have chosen the orange Glass instead of charcoal?

Ideally, Google Glass lets you do many of the things we now do with our smartphones, such as taking photos, reading news headlines or talking to our mothers on Sunday evenings—hands-free. But it comes with a bit of baggage.

Glass feels heavier when I'm out in public or in a group where I'm the only person wearing it. If I think about it long enough my face starts burning from embarrassment. The device has been described to me as "the scarlet letter of technology" by a friend. The most frequent response I get from my husband when I try to slip Glass on in his presence is "please take that off." This is the same husband who encouraged me to buy a sweater covered in googly-eyed cats.

Instead of looking at the world through a new lens on a crowded rush-hour sidewalk, I felt as if the whole world was looking at me. That's no small feat in New York, where even celebrities are afforded a sense of privacy and where making eye contact with strangers can amount to an entire conversation.

But that's just one side of wearing Google Glass.

The other side is exhilarating. Glass is getting some bad press lately. Some bars and coffee shops in Silicon Valley and Seattle have banned Google Glass, for example, and federal authorities in Ohio interrogated a man earlier this year after he was suspected of recording a movie with the device. Last month, Google put out a Glass etiquette guide that includes the appeal "don't be creepy or rude."

But the truth is that it's a groundbreaking device, even if it doesn't take off, even if it evolves into something completely different, even if we laugh at it 10 years from now while driving our flying cars in the skies of Manhattan.

I strolled around for a few hours with the cyborg glasses, happily snapping photos. With a mere wink, I captured snowy Lower Manhattan streetscapes and my reflection in the grimy subway-car windows.

There were some whispers. ("Did you see? Google Glass!") There were some comments as I squeezed into the subway with my fellow commuters —comparisons to the Segway scooter, and a warning that it will prove to be a huge battery drainer if I use my iPhone to connect Glass to the Internet.

For more human interaction, I walked into a small macaroon shop to buy a friend some birthday sweets. Alone but for the store clerks, I fumbled to take them off, find a place to put them on the small counter and get my wallet out of my bag.

"Sorry. You're the first people I'm interacting with wearing these. I don't mean to be a jerk," I told the man and woman at the counter. I took off Glass for the same reason that I take out my earbuds when I am talking to people. I don't want to appear like I am not paying attention to them.

It was fine, though. The woman thought Glass was cool. The man, he might not have, but he didn't say anything.

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