Review: Ups and downs with Google Glass apps

April 4 2014, by Barbara Ortutay

In this April 3, 2014, photo taken with Google Glass, AP reporter Barbara takes a photo of what she is cooking in New York. (AP Photo)

Google Glass is like a fickle friend. Surprises await, such as the time it took a photo of my ceiling while I was making carrot and ginger soup.

I've been using Google's Web-connected eyewear over the past few
months. Spending a day trying to get some chores done with it was frustrating at times, though it gave me a glimpse of what might be possible down the line.

Cooking with Glass, for example, frees my hands to stir, chop and season instead of leafing through a cookbook or getting grease on a tablet computer. Playing games on Glass by nodding my head around or shouting things was fun, once I got over the looking-crazy part. Or maybe that was part of the appeal. My favorite activity, hands down, is winking to take a photo, hands-free.

But perhaps I had mistakenly winked when I was trying to read ingredients on the Glass.

Glass takes a lot of time to get used to. That makes sense for a new type of device, but it strikes me as unusual when I could take most gadgets out of a box and intuitively know how to use them.

The day I spent doing chores had me calling Google's tech-support line three times and nearly breaking down in tears. On top of that, I got only two chores done.

That's a long way from a mass-market product. Google knows this and sells these $1,500 gadgets on an invitation basis to get feedback on how they work in day-to-day living. It's as though we're on a long journey together with Google.

— DOING LAUNDRY

Don't ask me for directions. I regularly wind up in circles in my own neighborhood, and I confidently send lost tourists north when they need
south. Maps on smartphones have been a godsend, but it's annoying having to hold my iPhone in front of me when I'm trying to find an address.

Enter Glass, which sits eyebrow-level and has a tiny screen above your right eye, eliminating the need to stare down at your phone. Glass responds to voice or touch commands, and it answers back on the screen.

I had to drop off some laundry, so I asked Glass to take me to my regular laundromat less than three blocks from my apartment:

"OK, Glass, get directions to the laundromat," I said.

Glass began searching for "aundora mint," whatever that is. Let's try this again.

"OK, Glass, get directions to the laundromat," I said.

Glass returned with nine options in my neighborhood, but it didn't include my standby, KT Laundromat.
"OK, Glass, get directions to KT Laundromat," I said.

I got Katie's Clean & Green Laundry in Lakewood, Ohio. At this point I started to get frustrated. Turns out that KT isn't in Google's maps database.

"OK, Glass, get directions to 500 Henry Street," I said, using the KT's street address.
Glass gave me 500 Henry Street in Manhattan, not Brooklyn.

I finally got directions after specifying Brooklyn.

I was on my way, Glass on my face, sun in my eyes and directions in my ears—that is, until I walked out of my apartment's Wi-Fi range. Without an Internet connection, Glass is just a really expensive headset with a camera. No maps, no apps and no directions. Good thing I know my way home.

Glass is supposed to connect online through your phone. I called tech support and reset the Glass and its connection with my phone. That didn't help. Turns out I need either an Android phone or a personal mobile hotspot. My iPhone plan doesn't let me create a hotspot. Oh.

— COOKING

Glass has a couple of cooking apps, which need to be installed separately. You get Google-approved "Glassware" apps by scrolling through a MyGlass app on your phone. KitchMe lets people search for recipes and plan meals. Allthecooks does that and also lets you share personal recipes with others. I gave the latter a spin.

"OK, Glass, find a recipe for carrot ginger soup," I said.

After the maps debacle, I was excited to see carrot and ginger soup pop up as the first result. I tapped the photo of it and got Step One of the recipe.

Hmmm. I still had no idea what ingredients I needed. I swiped back and forth on the Glass's touchpad above my right cheek. I said, "OK, Glass, get the ingredients." Nope.
Finally a Google search (on my laptop) revealed that I had to tilt my head back to see the ingredients on the screen. Pretty cool, though sometimes Glass would take a photo when I tilted.

In this April 3, 2014, photo AP reporter Barbara Ortutay is photographed wearing Google Glass in New York. (AP Photo)

After getting the hang of it, I chopped onions and carrots and simmered the soup with the recipe conveniently visible above my right eye. When two guests arrived at our apartment, I pushed Glass above my head like a headband to greet them. That way, I wouldn't look creepy.
I then returned to cooking.

At one point, I needed to know whether ground mustard is the same as mustard seed. I searched for it on Glass, but I got paragraph-length "answers" that didn't answer my question. Because of Glass's tiny screen, many of the long-winded results included only introductions, or the questions themselves.

I gave up. Mustard is mustard.

Nonetheless, cooking is one of those intuitive, simple uses for Google Glass that makes a lot of sense.

It also implies a whole slew of other possible uses for times when you need both hands for an activity.

I could see doctors, nurses, dentists incorporating it into their profession.

In my day-to-day life, I could see using Glass to snap photos of buildings, animals and even people to learn more about them, though I realize the last one is a touchy subject for many people. It would love to use Glass to navigate inside supermarkets and department stores to find specific products. I can also see using Glass to read me news articles while I'm getting ready in the morning (a feature already available).

Before most of this happens, though, I would need a reliable Internet connection and get over the difficulties, weird surprises and somewhat frustrating experiences that come with using Glass.

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