

Amid angst, tech industry innovates

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CES is nearly a week-long party celebrating the tech industry. But in recent years, the annual tech show, held earlier this month, has had a palpable sense of anxiety as much as excitement.

Products that have gotten lots of hype in recent years as the Next Big Thing, from 3-D television to 3-D Printers to smartwatches to [virtual reality](#) headsets, have either been busts or have struggled to catch on. And no one in the industry seems to have a clue about what new tech gadget will find more than a niche audience among consumers. Instead, many seem to be throwing out a bunch of stuff to see what sticks.

But amid all the angst and noise and silly products - a smart hairbrush, really? - you can find intriguing innovations. Many of these take advantage of the huge number of smartphones in use - or use the chips, wireless radios and powerful processors developed for them.

Take Pico, a startup with operations in San Francisco and China. It's come up with a standalone [virtual reality headset](#) called the Neo CV that tracks users as they move around a room - no external sensors needed. The headset also incorporates a processor and screen, so you don't need to connect it to a smartphone, a PC or game console.

The Pico addresses many of the shortcomings of the first generation of VR headsets, both of the high-end systems like Facebook's Oculus Rift and the low-end ones, like Samsung's Gear VR. With Pico, you wouldn't need to be tethered to a PC or [game console](#), but could still experience so-called "room-scale" VR. And you wouldn't have to worry about

burning through your smartphone's battery or having to choose between experiencing VR or taking a call.

Pico isn't saying how much the system will cost or when it will be available. But the Neo CV isn't just some pie-in-the-sky concept. I played a game on it where I was something like a spy trying to make my way through laser trip wires to a target. The system tracked me as a crouched and leaned, moved forward and stepped from side to side.

Bringing digital technologies to the realm of health and fitness has become a major focus of the electronics industry in recent years. One startup I met with has a gadget that's designed to help those trying to lose weight. Levl's eponymously named gadget can tell you in real time how much fat you are burning, whether you are in the middle of a workout or going about your daily life. You blow into a tube and a sensor in the toaster-shaped device detects the concentration of acetone in your breath.

Because acetone levels have been shown to correlate with fat loss, you can instantly get a sense of how well you might be working off excess pounds. Via a related smartphone app, you can track your progress over time as you change your workout regimen or diet.

Not all the cool innovations I saw at the show were so weighty. FoldiMate, for example, was showing off an invention that might make doing the laundry fun. Its self-named robotic device promises to fold your cleaned clothes for you, automatically, as long as they're not too big.

You just clip them to the machine, they go into a feeder and mechanical arms inside the machine neatly fold and steam them. Due out next year, the device is expected to cost from \$700 to \$850, which may be a bargain if you hate folding clothes, even if it won't do your fitted sheets.

Hulu is offering fun of a different kind. Later this year, it's planning to launch an online streamed multi-channel pay TV service similar to DirecTV Now and Sling TV. If you're used to the traditional grid of programs and channels, it will seem confusing, but it's much more streamlined and potentially, much easier to use.

The company is hoping cool features will help set it apart. Users will be able to pause a show they're watching on their living room TV and instantly resume watching it on their smartphone or tablet. Additionally, they will potentially get alerts when the score of a game they care about is close and instantly be able to record the closing minutes. The company plans for the service to include a DVR service at launch as well as access to Hulu's traditional streaming video offerings.

Speaking of TVs, LG and its subsidiary LG Display had some stunning ones on view at the show and in meeting rooms off the show floor. Unlike many of its rivals, it is betting on OLED technology as the future of televisions and displays. OLEDs don't require backlights; instead, an OLED screen itself emits light. That means they can be thinner and offer a much broader range between lights and darks than traditional LCD displays, which typically have at least some back lights on even when the screen is supposed to be black.

The company showed off a stunningly thin television that's supposed to hit stores later this year. The W models are as little as one-tenth of an inch thick and light enough that they can be hung with magnetic holders that are thin enough that the screen looks nearly flush with the wall. And the colors the screen could display were - at least to my eye - magnificent.

But perhaps the coolest technology I saw was presented by a company I wrote about last year, Vayyar. That company is using wall-penetrating ultra wideband radio waves for a variety of scanning applications.

Its first product, the Walabot, which went on sale last August, is a new-age kind of stud finder. Instead of beeping when it comes across a wire or wooden beam, it shows you on a smartphone screen a visual depiction of what it's seeing.

More products using its technology are on the way, including camera-like scanning devices that could be used to monitor elderly patients and alert their caregivers when they fall, track users' sleep patterns for signs of sleep apnea or in place of a traditional security camera to monitor multiple rooms at once for signs of a break-in.

So, while the [electronics industry](#) may be struggling, innovation isn't dead. There's a lot of cool stuff in the works. And who knows, some things might just become big hits .

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