

# VR's buzz has dimmed at CES 2019

Virtual reality was poised to take over the world just a few years ago

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NEW YORK — Just a few years ago, virtual reality was poised to take over the world. After decades of near misses, the revolution finally seemed imminent, with slick consumer headsets about to hit the market and industries from gaming and entertainment to social media ready to hop on the bandwagon.

But the buzz over VR has faded to a whisper. At the CES 2019 tech show in Las Vegas, Facebook's Oculus unit isn't holding any glitzy press events, just closed-door demos for its upcoming Oculus Quest, a \$399 untethered headset due out in the spring. Other VR companies are similarly subdued. HTC announced two new headsets — one with only sketchy details — while Sony has some kiosks for its \$300 PlayStation VR set in the



AP Photo/John Locher

People use Oculus VR headsets at the Panasonic booth at CES International in Las Vegas.

main hall.

It's a world away from the scene a few years ago, when VR products from Samsung, Oculus, HTC and Sony seemed omnipresent and unstoppable at CES. These days, VR is mostly a niche product for gaming and business training, held back by expensive, clunky headsets,

a paucity of interesting software and other technological shortcomings.

"VR hasn't escaped the early adopter, gamer-oriented segment," said Forrester analyst J.P. Gownder — himself an early adopter who chafed in 2016 at delays in shipping Facebook's then-ground-breaking Oculus Rift system.

Gownder said many existing VR setups are still too hard to use; even simpler mobile systems like Samsung's Gear VR, he said, don't offer "a clear reason for the average non-gamer to get involved."

VR proponents are still dreaming big, although the challenges remain formidable. Shipments of VR head-

sets rose 8 percent in the third quarter compared to the previous year, to 1.9 million units, according to data research firm International Data Corp. — an uptick that followed four consecutive quarters of decline. Nearly a quarter of a million units of Facebook's Oculus Go and Xiaomi's Mi VR — the same stand-alone VR headset, sold under different names in different markets — shipped worldwide in the quarter, IDC said.

Those still aren't huge numbers for a technology that seemed to hold such promise in 2012 when early demonstrations of the Oculus Rift wowed audiences — so much that Facebook acquired Oculus for \$2 billion two years later. Despite large sums plowed into the field by Facebook, Sony, Samsung, Microsoft and Google, VR hasn't yet made much of a dent in the real world.

Some of the biggest consumer complaints involve expense, laggy or glitchy graphics and the fact that many systems still tether the headsets to gaming consoles or PCs. "Technology is still

what's holding VR back," said eMarketer analyst Victoria Petrock. Upcoming stand-alone headsets like the Oculus Quest could solve some of those problems.

More alarming, though, VR still suffers from a lack of hit software. Many major game publishers have largely avoided the field so far, and venture funding for VR software development has nosedived this year.

SuperData, a digital games and VR market research company owned by Nielsen Holdings, estimates that consumer VR software investments dropped by a stunning 59 percent in 2018, to \$173 million from \$420 million the year before.

Software makers are retrenching. IMAX said in late December it was shutting down its VR unit. Jaunt, a startup focused on cinematic VR and once backed by Disney, restructured this year. Its new focus? VR's cousin technology, "augmented reality," which paints consumer-simulated objects into the real world, a la the cartoony monsters of "Pokemon Go."

# A high-tech spin for the old-school peephole

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The CES 2019 gadget show is revving up in Las Vegas. Here are the latest findings and observations from Associated Press reporters on the ground.

## The peephole is ringing

Ring is giving the old-school peephole a high-tech spin.

The company unveiled a new internet-connected video doorbell that fits into most peepholes. The new device is aimed at apartment dwellers or college students who want a video doorbell, but may not be allowed to install one next to their doors. Amazon bought Ring last

year, giving it a shot at competing better with Google's Nest, which also makes cameras and doorbells. Privacy experts have long sounded the alarm on Wi-Fi connected cameras and how video is stored. Amazon recently filed a patent application for a facial-recognition system involving home security cameras, which would allow multiple cameras to create composites of faces to identify people who may be trying to burglarize a house. It doesn't appear Ring uses facial recognition yet, as Nest already does, though Ring may add such features over time. Amazon did not respond to a request

for comment.

Ring's Door View Cam will go on sale in March for \$199. Ring's new device will still act as a peephole, but will also send alerts to user's smartphones when the doorbell is pressed or someone knocks the door.

## Shades that text

Smart glasses haven't been a hit, but at least one startup still sees them in our future.

A company called North will be delivering its \$999 smart glasses to customers in the coming weeks. Called Focals by North, they pair with a smartphone and show text messages, weather and

mapping directions on the glass that only the wearer sees.

Users also need to wear a ring with a joystick on their index finger, so they can flip through messages or respond with their thumb. It can also be controlled using the built-in Amazon Alexa voice assistant, but the joystick has to be pressed down for it to start listening.

Getting people to buy smart glasses has been a challenge — Google famously stopped selling its smart glasses to the public about four years ago.

Aaron Grant, North's co-founder, says his product is different because they are

designed to look like regular frames. And prescription lenses can be added.

But there's a small projector on one side, and the frames on the side are slightly thicker.

## Fresh bread, no baker

That smell wafting through the CES show? Freshly baked bread.

Wilkinson Baking Co. unveiled a 22-square-foot machine that can bake 10 loaves of bread every hour — no baker needed. But a human is needed to dump the ingredients into the machine, which then mixes them, forms the dough and starts baking.



AP Photo/John Locher

The new Door View Cam is on display at the Ring booth before CES International on Monday in Las Vegas.

## THURSDAY AFTERNOON & EVENING

Table with columns for time slots (12 PM, 12:30, 1 PM, 1:30, 2 PM, 2:30, 3 PM, 3:30, 4 PM, 4:30, 5 PM, 5:30, 6 PM, 6:30, 7 PM, 7:30, 8 PM, 8:30, 9 PM, 9:30, 10 PM, 10:30, 11 PM, 11:30) and rows for various channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, etc.) listing programs like 'Into the Wild', 'Divorce Court', 'The Talk', etc.

## JANUARY 10, 2019

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## THURSDAY LATE NIGHT & FRIDAY MORNING

Table with columns for time slots (12 AM, 12:30, 1 AM, 1:30, 2 AM, 2:30, 3 AM, 4 AM, 4:30, 5 AM, 5:30, 6 AM, 6:30, 7 AM, 7:30, 8 AM, 8:30, 9 AM, 9:30, 10 AM, 10:30, 11 AM, 11:30) and rows for various channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, etc.) listing programs like 'CR TV', 'AgDay', 'The Game', etc.