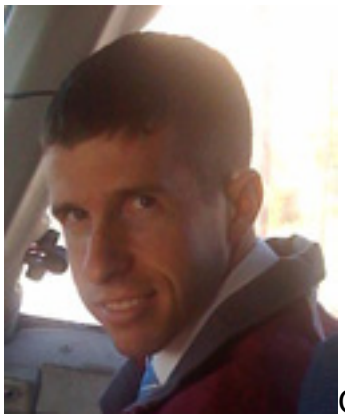
CES 2013 a meager showcase for consumer electronics

Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor



CES has never been more irrelevant.

I wrote those words last year [1] when Microsoft pulled out of CES and the industry was in the thralls of its 3D hysteria, pushing a technological gimmick that no one wanted.

Since then, the industry has found a new rallying cry – 4K (or Ultra-HD) – and largely abandoned hopes of shoving stereoscopy down our throats, but the pizzazz is still missing. CES is no longer the fountainhead of innovation it once was.

Instead, it's become a gaudy showcase for booth babes, flashy lights, and bigger and sexier TVs. And perhaps it always has been, but when one of the hottest announcements is a kitschy "smartwatch [2]," you'd forgive this editor for being a tad cynical.

Gone are the days when true innovations – groundbreaking products like the VCR,

Laserdisc, CD player, Blu-Ray, and the Xbox – debuted at the Consumer Electronics Show (henceforth known as “International CES”).

Four years ago, the biggest buzz at CES centered around the Palm Pre, a smartphone that was quickly forgotten. Attendees have been going crazy over the Parrot AR.Drone, a remote-controlled flying toy, since 2010. And for the last four years, every major manufacturer has been force-feeding us all things 3D – 3D TVs, 3D movies, 3D projectors, 3D laptops, 3D gaming, etc., etc.

But true innovation – at least at CES – has seemingly gone the way of COMDEX, the now defunct computer expo (and an early rival to CES) that was previously held in Las Vegas from 1979-2003.

What happened? Why has CES slipped in relevance?

A combination of factors have colluded to bury CES among all the noise (much like the tiny handful of interesting products that get lost amidst all the clamor in Vegas). Apple never signed on to the world’s largest consumer electronics show, instead announcing its products at proprietary company events like MacWorld. That, alone, cut down the legitimacy of CES, particularly when Apple experienced a resurgence and briefly became the most profitable company in the world.

A plethora of smaller events also stole the consumer thunder from CES. The Mobile World Congress – held annually since 1987 – traditionally falls in February, and more than ever, it seems that manufacturers are withholding big announcements for that vertical trade show in Barcelona, Spain.

Microsoft pulled out of CES because their “product news milestones generally don’t align with the show’s January timing” (meaning we can expect proprietary Microsoft events or news conferences for all future announcements).

And shows like the Electronic Entertainment Expo (aka, E3), the gaming industry’s premier trade event, split off from CES years ago.

Don’t get me wrong – CES 2013 showcased several products that piqued my interest. Sony unveiled the slick-looking Xperia Z smartphone, Xi3 spotlighted the Piston modular computer (which may or may not be the long-rumored Valve “Steam Box”), and Nvidia showed off the Project Shield, an Android-based gaming system.

But none of this will set the consumer world on fire.

One thing’s for certain – with attendance again topping 150,000 and all the millions in revenue it brings to Vegas, CES isn’t going anywhere … at least not anytime soon. But the pinnacle of innovation, the nerd Mecca, has become as kitschy and gaudy as its host city, Las Vegas. The Consumer Electronics Show has become old-hat.

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