

# Automakers play catch-up to wearable technology

Michael Martinez, The Detroit News 12:31 a.m., EDT March 18, 2015

That Apple Watch coming to stores next month could one day connect motorists to their cars in ways never before possible.

Wearable devices — not only smartwatches, but also devices like Google Glass — have largely been absent from the driving experience. But Apple Inc.'s new offering may vault wearable technology into the automotive cockpit.

The devices can monitor sleep, serve as close-up microphones for phone calls and commands, and show turn-by-turn directions in more convenient ways than your smartphone. Automakers and suppliers are experimenting with whether sensors and software inside the wrist-worn computers could interact with infotainment systems, warn of upcoming crashes or other road hazards, remotely start a vehicle — even vibrate or beep to wake drowsy drivers.

"Wearables are a whole new area for the driver and it can provide some useful ways to communicate — but it also could provide additional distractions depending on what you do with them," Gary Strumolo, manager for vehicle design and infotronics of Ford research and innovation, said in a recent report issued by vehicle technology-tracking firm TU Automotive.

## Smartwatch apps

Hyundai's smartwatch app can remotely lock or unlock, start and locate your vehicle. BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Nissan have concept apps that can do everything from monitor a driver's health to alert a driver that an accident or traffic jam is ahead.



Hyundai  
Blue Link app



BMW  
Samsung Galaxy Gear app



Nissan  
Nismo smartwatch



Mercedes-Benz  
Pebble smartwatch app

Source: Automakers

The Detroit News

Today, few auto-related options are available. Hyundai has an app for Samsung watches that can remotely start, lock or unlock and locate cars. A handful of luxury automakers has developed prototype apps for smartwatches, but none has been announced for production. Some automakers and suppliers have even experimented with Google Glass apps, but scrapped plans as interest in the high-tech headwear waned.

"Generally speaking, there hasn't been a lot of tie-ins between automobiles and wearables — and that's because there's still a pretty small number of people using it, and they're mostly using it for fitness," said Karl Brauer, senior analyst with Kelley Blue Book. "I think what happens in the next 12 months with the Apple Watch will be a real litmus test. If there's rapid adoption, there will be rapid adoption by the auto industry."

The possibilities are exciting.

Google Glass or another headset-like device could use heads-up displays that would appear in a driver's line of vision to show GPS directions, alert them in real time if an accident or traffic jam lay ahead, or even indicate if the car was running low on gas — all without the driver needing to glance away from the road.

Smartwatches could alert users when they need to leave for an upcoming trip to beat traffic or serve as a microphone to make calls, play music or otherwise interact with in-car infotainment systems. Since the microphone is closer to the driver's mouth, it hypothetically would be clearer and easier for the infotainment system to understand.

The watches can monitor heart rate and body temperature and could theoretically interact with the car or call for help if the driver suddenly got sick or had a heart attack.

"When this technology does enter the connected-car space, it will most certainly be a major disruptor," the TU Automotive report said.

### **Google Glass not as popular**

Wearable technology with automotive-related applications is mostly limited to smartwatches, since Google Glass's launch hasn't been as successful as some anticipated.

The company shut down its Explorer program — in which users could pay \$1,500 to test early versions of the device — in January, but it was derided for looking too bulky and geeky. Privacy concerns were raised, and the Journal of the American Medical Association said recently that Google Glass limits vision and could be dangerous to drivers.

"It just doesn't have a mass-market appeal," said Brent Van Wieringen, director of user experience and product design for Inrix, a mobile and traffic app developer.

Inrix started working on a traffic app that would work with Glass, but instead shifted its research and development to smartwatch apps. Inrix has one for Android watches, and is working to develop a similar app for the Apple Watch.

Two years ago at the Consumer Electronics Show, Hyundai unveiled a Google Glass app for the 2015 Genesis sedan that would allow users to locate, lock and unlock, and remotely start their cars. The app would also send drivers notifications when maintenance is due.

The project has since been halted. But Miles Johnson, Hyundai's manager of connected car publicity, said the automaker, much like Inrix, took that same software and is now applying it to smartwatches.

### **Watch apps focus on drivers**

Inrix is focusing on features that alert drivers when they need to leave for a trip, and remotely start the engine during cold winter months.

"Is it really safe or not to create these things that are going to distract you on your wrist?" he said. "It's sort of a companion piece to the car. It's more about getting you to your car than getting you to wherever you need to go."

Mercedes-Benz and Hyundai appear to agree.

Mercedes-Benz is exploring an app with the Pebble smartwatch that lets users remotely lock a car and check for its location, but there are no production plans.

Hyundai this month introduced an app for Android-based smartwatches that lets drivers do everything its concept Glass app did through the Blue Link infotainment system. The automaker also plans to have a version for the Apple Watch. While the app doesn't have an in-car driving features, Johnson said the automaker will keep on top of developments to see how it can best be applied.

"We're willing to take some risks and see where this technology goes," he said. "There's more and more ways you interact with the car. I think that's just pretty amazing in terms of what the future may bring."

### **'Wellness of the driver'**

Other automakers are looking at certain in-car applications.

BMW has a prototype smartwatch app for its i3 electric car that lets drivers use their Samsung Galaxy Gear to check whether their vehicle's windows are shut or to lock it remotely. It also displays the car's electric power range, lets users regulate in-car temperature and send navigation information to the infotainment display.

Nissan last year unveiled a concept smartwatch that pairs with its race cars. It can track everything from vehicle speed and fuel levels, to driver heart rate and body temperature.

"Nissan's Nismo smartwatch has some quite compelling use cases like wellness of the driver," Filomena Berardi, telematics analyst for technology consulting firm ABI, said in a report. "Nissan is trying to elevate the driving experience and bundle the watch with its cars, which is a good strategy."

The watch is still a concept, and there are no production plans, a Nissan representative said.

Kelley Blue Book's Brauer said the Nissan watch could have the most important application.

"It's this health monitoring that these wearables are rapidly engaging in that would transfer most easily to your car," Brauer said. "The cars already have navigation systems, music, contacts, so nothing a watch offers is going to be new... but the health monitoring would."

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