# Alexa’s real competition is still your phone screen

One of the big themes we’ve been tracking for a few years now is Amazon’s various attempts to make Alexa useful outside your home. Amazon has a very good value proposition for customers inside their houses: Echo speakers are great for music, timers and such in the kitchen, and smarthome controls.

Amazon clearly has ambitions to make Alexa the leading platform for ambient computing. But to do that, it needs more ubiquity than it can achieve right now. That’s one reason that Amazon was so excited to announce a partnership with GM to make Alexa available on those cars. It’s also one reason I was surprised to see the company didn’t announce any updates to the Echo Auto.

But the most obvious way to do that is to be the default assistant on phones. Amazon is probably never going to get there, because Apple won’t allow it, for one thing. On Android you *can* switch our your default assistant from Google to Alexa, but the number of customers who realize that’s possible is small and the number who are likely to do it is even smaller.

I would like to say that the phone problem is Alexa’s biggest issue, but it’s not. It’s simply the easiest explanation for why any third-party technology is bad: without deep system-level access, third-party accessories and ecosystems end up failing on phones all the time. Alexa on phones is often more capable than it gets credit for — but it’s still nowhere near as good nor as integrated as the Google Assistant or even Siri.

To just blame closed ecosystems is too simplistic. There’s actually a chicken and egg problem here. Let’s call the

chicken the lack of platform-level access on phones. The egg is that Alexa is often comically bad outside the home. Our Echo Auto review lays it out: Alexa regularly sends you down infuriating and circular discussion paths when you're just trying to get something done.

It actually is possible to make Alexa somewhat useful in the car or even when you're walking down the street, but you have to work at it a bit. You have to put more of your online life into Alexa's hands, and right now the Alexa ecosystem can't handle as much as Apple or Google can. Alexa is very good at smart home gadgets, lists, and a few other domains, but it feels very disconnected from the rest of the things in your digital life: your email, calendar, messages, and all the rest.

So while you *can* connect a lot of that up, how many people are really, fully living that "Alexa Life?" Whatever the number is, it's probably not enough to start a virtuous cycle of Alexa use outside the home.

You might be familiar with the original "Siri Problem," where you'd try it a few times and Siri would fail completely, so you'd give up on it. It took Siri years to get over that problem — and in some ways it still suffers from it. Siri isn't great, but I think it's better than its reputation for a lot of the simple things people ask of it.

I think the same sort of problem applies to Alexa outside the home, only solving it will be doubly hard because of the platform access problem.

All of which is a very long preamble to talking about the hardware products that I personally found the most intriguing at Amazon's event. While the Echo speakers — especially the Echo Studio — are likely to be the things that are most popular in the next year, I think the Echo Buds, the Echo Frames, and the Echo Loop ring may be more important to

Amazon’s future.

Don’t misread me: the “Day1” label put on the Frames and the Loop are a sign that these are very much beta products. They’re invite-only and they’re probably not going to be all that great to use. I tried the Loop out a few times and was not very impressed.

Plus, you have to be a particular kind of person to want to wear slightly-dorky looking accessories like the Frame or the Loop. If you are, you’re probably the kind of person who’s also more likely to go through the effort it takes to live that Alexa Life. If so, you’re the ideal person for Amazon to learn from. The Frames and the Loop are market research masquerading as consumer products.

But the Echo Buds are something different: they are genuinely mass-market and genuinely competitive to other wireless earbuds. They are aggressively (some might say predatorily) priced, feature-rich, and higher-quality than many first-gen Amazon products. We’ll need to do a full-review to really judge them, but it’s hard not to see them as an effort to get you to use Alexa more.

Maybe. There are plenty of other Bluetooth headphones out in the world that already support Alexa and they aren’t exactly seen as a threat to Siri or Google. Even if the Echo Buds prove to be wildly popular, I suspect they’ll only add a modest bump to Alexa’s overall usage. Amazon will see what people are willing to ask Alexa while on the go, though, and use that to build more features going forward – just like it has with the Echo speakers in your house.

Alexa’s real competition outside the home isn’t the Google Assistant or Siri. It’s your thumbs and the screen you tap with them. If Amazon can get you to talk to your headphones

and not pull your phone out of your pocket just once or twice a day, that's a marginal win for Alexa.

Then again, if Amazon's hardware efforts has taught us anything over the years, it has been that the company knows how to build a business off slim margins.

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# More from The Verge

+ Oculus is trying to make the Quest the only home headset that matters

Amazon's big event wasn't the only big tech event this week — the other was Oculus' conference. As per usual, I need to disclose that my wife works for Oculus, so I'll let Adi Robertson and Nick Statt's coverage tell you what happened there:

> *If Oculus Link actually works, and you're a normal person who likes to play or watch VR experiences at home, there's basically no reason to buy anything but a Quest. It offers a huge jump in capabilities over the Oculus Go, which makes it easily worth the extra $200. (Almost nobody needs a VR headset right now. So if you're going to get one, it's worth spending more on something that expands your options so much.) Even if you primarily use VR with a gaming PC, the Quest adds a lot of functionality over a Rift S for the same $399 price. And it's clearly where Oculus is focusing its efforts right now, so it might be faster to get future updates as well.*

+ Oculus Link will let you plug your Quest headset into a gaming PC to play Rift games

+ Oculus is launching hand tracking on Quest next year

+ Facebook says it will build AR glasses and map the world

## Pixel leaks: can’t stop won’t stop

A new Pixel 4 XL leak shows off next-gen Google Assistant and face unlock

Android 10 Go is a faster and more secure update to Google’s lightweight OS

OnePlus 7T review: the best of the 7 Pro, for less

List of apps supporting Pixel 4 motion gestures leaks

## Amazon’s 80 announcements

+ Amazon event 2019: Echo Buds, Frames, Loop, Eero, Studio, Ring camera, and Alexa updates: This is a good roundup of everything that happened.

+ Amazon says last years’ microwave sold really well, so it now has made an Amazon Alexa Smart Oven.

+ Amazon’s new Echo Studio sounds like the future of smart speakers

Dan Seifert got an early exclusive look at this. Other than size, I can’t think of a single good reason to get a HomePod over this. I’d wait for a proper review, though, before buying.

+ How Amazon’s new Echos compare to other smart speakers

+ Amazon announces Fetch pet tracker that uses new Sidewalk networking – I have many thoughts about this, my piece about it will go up next week.

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