The best PCs, gadgets, and future tech of CES 2019

Enlarge / Samsung’s Space monitor in a lowered configuration.

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CES 2019 has finally come to an end—and by and large, it was a more interesting show than last year’s. To that end, the Ars reviews staff has put together another annual Best in Show list, and this group of products we consider *particularly* interesting.

As was the case with CES 2018, the main takeaway from most of the press releases and product pitches we’ve read and heard over the past couple of weeks has been “Google Assistant and/or Amazon Alexa are in everything.” But to be frank, we don’t find that to be the most interesting thing happening at CES right now. For most users, digital voice assistants are still just a curiosity, and nothing major happened at CES to push them forward—the voice assistant story this year was simply one of ubiquity. The best innovations and products in this category were largely iterative ones or one-off clever designs that wouldn’t find a place in broader “CES trends” pieces.

By contrast, our list is a small one given the vast number of products at the show. There's always a tension when judging CES products this way: do we select the products that represent remarkable innovation and give us a glimpse of something neat or useful in a not-too-distant future or the products that are going to be easiest to recommend to prospective buyers right now in 2019? This year, the Ars team wants to err on the side of the here and now, but we stretched that a little bit for certain gadgets that pushed the envelope while still being viable products that will ship to real users.

At a show where most product categories are either so mature that there's little innovation or so new that they're not ready to be in the hands of consumers yet, it's a rare and refreshing treat to see something that will make someone's life a little better (or just a little cooler) right here in 2019. These are the products that met that criteria at CES 2019.

A nearly perfect Windows laptop: Dell XPS 13

- The new Dell XPS 13 laptop.
  Valentina Palladino
- It'll come in white, black, and a new rose-gold finish.
  Valentina Palladino
- The webcam sits on top of the display! Finally!
  Valentina Palladino
- The overall design of the ultrabook is nearly identical to last year's model.
  Valentina Palladino
- A few ports adorn its sides, including a microSD card slot.
  Valentina Palladino
- Two additional USB-C ports sit here along with a lock

slot.
Valentina Palladino

- It’ll support 8th-gen, quad-core Intel processors, up to 16GB of RAM, and up to 2TB of PCIe SSD storage.
Valentina Palladino

Every time we’ve reviewed Dell’s recent XPS 13 laptops, we’ve mostly adored them, but we’ve always had to include one particularly irritating caveat: the webcam was below the screen, not above it. That led to some strange and unflattering views for whoever you’re video chatting with or streaming to.

The 2019 model finally fixes that, so we’re newly looking forward to reviewing the Dell XPS 13. We expect it will be difficult to find many strong bullet points for “the bad” or “the ugly” sections.

The improved webcam now measures at 2.25mm, so it can fit in the thin bezel above the display. That does come at a cost, however: the XPS 13 no longer has an IR camera for Windows Hello given the lack of space. In case that’s a concern, though, Dell offers an optional fingerprint reader add-on.

Other changes are simply light iterations, but there’s nothing wrong with that when the existing XPS 13 is one of the best modern laptops. The screen is the same, but it now supports HDR content via Windows HD Color. And the new XPS 13 has an improved thermal management system, which should get more performance out of current-gen Intel processors. Dell is also promising better battery life for 2019, and minor changes have been made to the lid and hinge for usability.

All that means an already-great laptop from 2018 is poised to be better in 2019.

A gaming desktop in a laptop form factor: Alienware Area 51M

- Alienware’s new top-end gaming laptop, the Area-51m.
- Alienware says this is the start of a new design language for the brand.
- A large set of vents jut out the back of the notebook.
- The Area-51m is still very much a gaming laptop, but it has a lesser footprint than past Alienware 17-inch laptops.
- A look at the side of the Area-51m.
- There is customizable RGB backlighting, because that is what the law of gaming laptops apparently demands.

And now for a completely different kind of laptop: the Alienware Area 51M, also from Dell. This device packs desktop gaming hardware into a laptop form factor—albeit for a steep price and in a 17-inch size that is only *sort of* portable.

Gaming laptop-makers have thrown around the phrase “desktop replacement” with reckless abandon over the years, and it has usually been not entirely true for gamers. That’s especially the case when today’s PC gamers aren’t even settling for 60fps or 1080p—it’s 4K @ 144Hz or bust for some. Dell/Alienware’s answer in 2019 is to ship what basically amounts to an all-in-one desktop computer and call it a laptop.

That means desktop-grade components like Intel’s six-core i7-8700 or eight-core i9-9900K, and an RTX 2060 video card with 6GB GDDR6 video memory in the base model or an RTX 2080 with 8GB GDDR6 if you need even more performance. There are even options for RAM up to 64GB, which is hilariously more than almost any gamer would need. And yes, you can configure the gigantic 17.3-inch display to be 144Hz, though it is only 1080p.

Dell’s approach also means the components like the battery,

hard drive, CPU, GPU, and RAM are user-upgradeable. This is huge for gaming laptop enthusiasts. Just note that this gigantic machine is also 8.54 pounds and 1.7 inches thick, and it has the usual gaming aesthetic trappings, like a bunch of RGB lighting effects.

Practical? Not really. Portable? Absolutely not. Powerful? You bet. It's not for everyone, but it's *really* for the people it's for.

A Google Assistant product that actually looks useful: Lenovo Smart Clock

- The front and back of the Lenovo Smart Clock.
- With a cloth back, it looks just like a Google Home product.
- Lenovo's Smart Clock next to the bigger Lenovo Smart Display.
- The top has plus and minus volume buttons.
- The back has a power port, microphone mute switch, and a USB-A port for charging your phone.
- Lenovo's press materials pitch the device as the perfect bedside clock.
- Here's one of the funky clock faces.
- A more normal clock face.

How do you make a product with a voice assistant stand out when *every* product has a voice assistant? Lenovo did it by packing everything we liked about Google-driven smart displays from last year into a very small, 4-inch form factor. It's designed to be your bedside table alarm clock, and it turns out that Google Assistant is a good fit for that place in your home.

You can use it as an alarm clock, of course—it supports

Google’s gentle wakeup routine, which we previously saw in the Pixel 3’s Pixel Stand. But you can also use it to track calendar events, ask questions, control various gadgets in your smart home (a perfect fit for the start of the day), and listen to music. It also supports some clock faces that aren’t part of the standard Google package.

As for the specs: its 4-inch touchscreen display has a resolution of 800×480, and it sports a 1.5GHz MediaTek 8167S SoC with four Cortex A35 cores and a PowerVR GE8300 GPU. It also has 1GB of RAM and 8GB of storage. The Smart Clock even has a USB port for charging your phone while you rest.

The Lenovo Smart Clock also apes Google’s cloth-based design as part of a recent design trend to make gadgets a little more comfortable for the humans who use them. It’s due out in the spring and will cost $79—$50 less than the Alexa-equipped Echo Spot it will directly compete with.

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