What to Expect at the All-Digital CES 2021

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For decades, tech journalists have kicked off the new year with a trip to Las Vegas for a little gambling and a lot of tech news. But this year, with COVID-19 still raging out of control around the globe, CES 2021 is an all-digital affair.

In-person events and networking events are off the table, but major tech companies that have grown accustomed to running online events are doing the same for CES. This year's show runs from Jan. 11-14; we've already seen a few pre-show announcements, but here's what PCMag analysts expect to see at the reimagined CES 2021.

Laptops

CES is frequently chock full of innovative laptop designs, and despite the show being virtual this year, we don't expect the stable of innovations to subside. In fact, we expect the 2021 show to be brimming with new laptops at every price and feature set.

There will undoubtedly be a gaggle of inexpensive Windows laptops and Chromebooks, since they have been hard to come by over the past few months as people working and learning from home have snapped them up. Even before the show officially started, Samsung announced a new midrange Chromebook, and we expect other manufacturers to follow suit.



Samsung Galaxy Chromebook2

There will also be plenty of new cutting-edge features available for premium laptops. Expect more OLED screens and more models available with 5G. Laptops aimed at enterprise IT customers will also be in abundance this year, as Fortune 500 companies, community colleges, and every organization in between adapts to the new work-from-home environment. New Dell Latitude and Lenovo ThinkPad models aimed at business users are typically some of the hottest laptops at CES.

As for quirky designs, we've already seen several prototypes and concepts announced, including a lookalike Nintendo Switch laptop from Lenovo, complete with a game controller. We also expect plenty of other gaming innovations. Rumors and leaks suggest that Intel may announce more details about its next-generation CPUs for gaming rigs. We might also see new laptop chips from AMD and Nvidia; both companies are holding press conferences during the show. *—Tom Brant and Matt Buzzi*

PC Components

Though most of the component-introduction madness—GeForce, Ryzen, Radeon—from late 2020 has passed, 2021 is already

forming up a likely strong second wave, with rumored releases from Intel, Nvidia, and AMD all potentially just around the corner.

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First up: Intel. The company has had a rough go of it over the past couple of years, with AMD hammering it on all sides on desktop silicon (and now, to an extent, mobile chips) and winning nearly every fight it enters. Intel hopes that its next (and reportedly final) deployment of its aging 14nm lithography, chips based on the next "Rocket Lake" microarchitecture, will be enough to carry its stack of desktop CPUs over the line until the company can reliably produce its own 7nm options at scale. The company hasn't yet announced any official plans to present "Rocket Lake" at CES, but we'll keep an ear to the ground as more rumors circulate about an early 2021 release date for Rocket Lake chips. (Last week, it was leaked that motherboards based on the Z590 and B560 chipsets would be launching imminently, and just this week Gigabyte confirmed that Rocket Lake CPU silicon should be due out in March.)

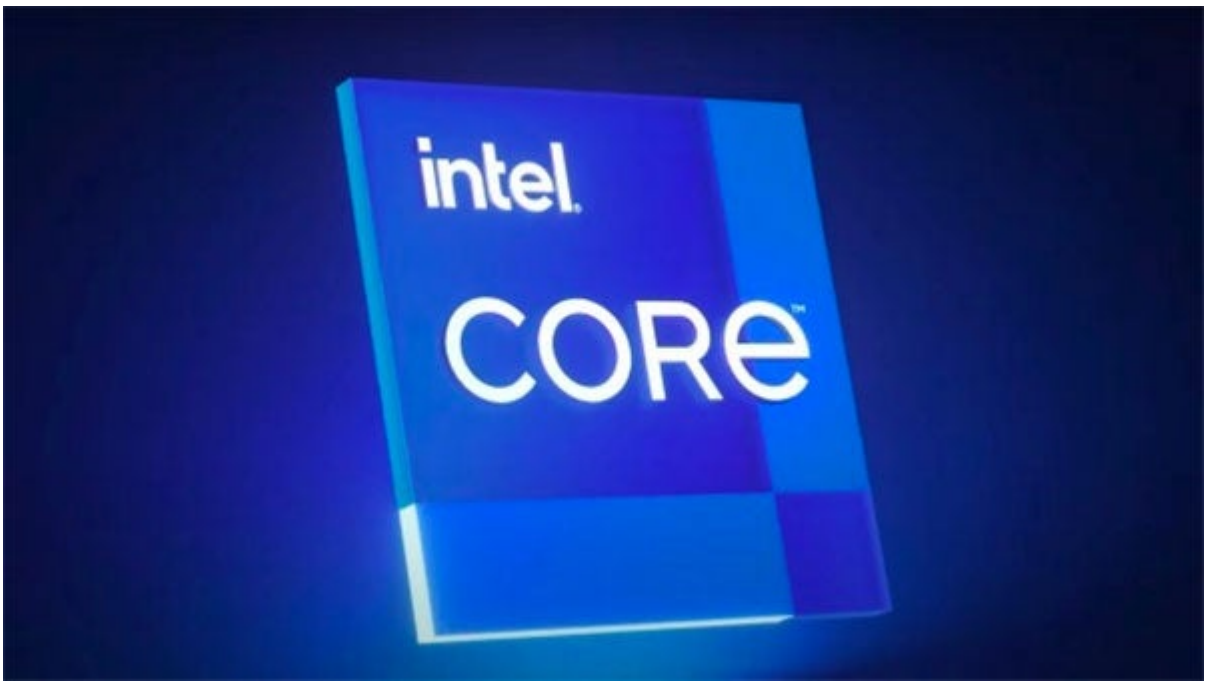


Image credit: Intel

Meanwhile, on the GPU front, both AMD and Nvidia spent the second half of 2020 duking it out, with the latter's GeForce RTX 3080 going toe-to-toe with AMD's Radeon RX 6800 XT (and coming out the victor on the other side). Now, both Nvidia and AMD have rumors swirling about new introductions into their 30 Series and 6000 Series of desktop graphics cards, respectively, which would further extend and complicate the midrange, with options like the GeForce RTX 3060 (possibly called GeForce RTX 3060 Ultra) and Radeon RX 6700 and Radeon RX 6700 XT planned for launches sometime in 2021.

2020 might be a hard year to top in the world of component releases, but 2021 is kicking things off in full gear. Stay tuned as Dr. Lisa Su takes to the virtual stage at this year's CES keynote on Tuesday, Jan. 12, at 11 a.m. ET for an idea of what AMD has planned, while details about Nvidia's next moves will come an hour after after that.—*Chris Stobing*

Phones

The biggest mobile release at CES isn't happening at CES: it's the Samsung Galaxy S21, which will arrive at Samsung Unpacked at 10 a.m. on January 14, the last day of CES. Unpacked is coincidental with CES but not part of it, and in this virtual world there's a valid debate over whether that means it's "during" CES or not.

Samsung and Apple dominate US and Canadian phone sales; the S21 will be the first Qualcomm Snapdragon 888-powered phone in the US, and it will set the tone for the first half of the year. The thing I'll most be looking at is the price. Last year, Samsung grotesquely miscalculated how much people would want to spend on phones in 2020. I'd love to see the company continue the trend it started with the S20 FE, bringing great features back down to Earth in terms of price.

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Motorola may be bringing several new phones to the table, according to professional leaker Steve Hemmersdorfer. He's promising a new Moto G Stylus and Moto G Pro; on SlashLeaks, they follow up with a new Moto G Power and Moto G Play for a total of four. Quad-camera systems abound in these phones, but what I'm most interested in there will be the chipsets: will they be using the Qualcomm 690, or will they be powerful but very low-cost phones on the new Qualcomm 480?

> *So… Here comes your very first look at the #Motorola #MotoGStylus 2021! #VoiceCommunity #OnlyOnVoice@VoiceHQExclusive https://t.co/UUGExb0yLj*
>
> *PS: Happy New Year and all the Best to all of you! pic.twitter.com/7Zlta5rgd9*
>
> *— Steve H.McFly (@OnLeaks) January 2, 2021*

There's a TCL press conference on the calendar for Jan. 11, but there haven't been many rumors out there about what it might entail. TCL being TCL, we should expect some low-cost 5G phones, possibly once again based on that fast yet inexpensive Snapdragon 480 chipset.

Most other smartphone companies tend to hold announcements for the Mobile World Congress timeframe, but that's been thrown into chaos as MWC, normally at the end of February, was moved to late June because of coronavirus. I still think we aren't going to see a lot of other phone announcements at CES. Rather, they'll trickle out in separate virtual events over the next several months. (The next big ones for the US are likely to be LG, in February, and the OnePlus 9, in March.)—*Sascha Segan*

5G

A lot of exhibitors are going to be talking about 5G, but it's going to be hard to find any who really have something to say. We've already had three years of events with vendors showing off private networks, remote surgery, drone control, holographic communication, multi-angle video, and other solutions that either still aren't real or work perfectly well with Wi-Fi or 4G. I expect to hear a lot more of the same.

That puts a lot of pressure on Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg's keynote to explain to consumers why they should care about 5G when all three of the major US carriers are popping 5G icons left and right with no better performance than 4G—and often worse. Vestberg has a set speech he's been giving for a while about the "eight currencies of 5G," but consumers don't have any of those "currencies" in their wallets. He needs to show up with the equivalent of a big cash cannon and shoot "5G currencies" into the crowd. I'll be watching his keynote with great expectations.—*Sascha Segan*

E-Readers

CES has long been a place where color E Ink-like technologies—including Color E Ink itself—make big promises that too often haven't ended up in consumer products. Along with Color E Ink, there were years of promises around Mirasol, a Qualcomm-backed display technology that never really panned out. Now TCL is entering the arena. At CES 2021, we expect to see the first e-readers or tablets with TCL's NXTPAPER, which was introduced in September with promises of a product "in the near future." NXTPAPER is meant for tablets and e-readers; it's transflective like E Ink, but presumably won't struggle with the production issues and refresh rate problems that have made Color E Ink readers so hard to find. —*Sascha Segan*

TVs



MicroLED TV

Image credit: Samsung

8K will continue to be the biggest topic across the board for TVs at CES. But while more 8K TVs will arrive in 2021, content providers must catch up to the higher resolution, and we probably won’t see that for a while. Besides 8K, expect improvements to both newish and longstanding TV panel technology. Samsung already unveiled its consumer-available MicroLED TV, a fascinating huge-screen alternative to OLED that’s been teased mostly as a modular enterprise display for the last few years. OLED itself still has room to grow, and the stalwart LED-backlit LCD panels on which the vast majority of TVs run will probably continue to steadily improve.—*Will Greenwald*

Audio

Spatial audio is the biggest new thing to hit home sound systems (and some very clever headphones and gaming headsets) in the last few years. It breaks free of discrete channels to mix sound sources in a sphere, which can then get distributed to whatever number and arrangement of drives you have in your setup. Expect to see more Dolby Atmos and DTS:X devices and other audio products that do fun and immersive things with directional audio. While not technically a CES reveal, meanwhile, Samsung's Jan. 14 event is expected to include the launch of the Galaxy Buds Pro.—*Will Greenwald*

Virtual Reality

The virtual reality scene has been shifting and settling over time, and for consumers the two biggest names currently are Oculus with the Quest 2 and Valve with the Index. They both fill very different niches and have very different prices and requirements, and it's unlikely either system will see a big announcement at CES. That leaves plenty of space in the enterprise sector for VR and augmented reality (AR) displays to gather attention, but you won't be seeing many new products designed for consumers.—*Will Greenwald*

Smart Speakers and Screens

This is another category that's sectioned off so securely in its two major camps that we won't likely see anything mind-blowing at CES. Amazon Alexa and Google Assistant remain the biggest voice assistants in the smart speaker and smart display categories, and both Amazon and Google tend to make announcements at their own events.—*Will Greenwald*

Health and Fitness

With no in-person show to demo new wares, CES 2021 is going to be pretty quiet on the health and fitness front. Wearable device makers often debut new fitness trackers at CES, but expect all the major fitness tracker and smartwatch makers—including Apple, Samsung, Fitbit, Garmin, Polar—to release new bands and watches on their own schedules in 2021. If last year is any indication, we'll likely see refreshed Fitbit and Samsung wearables in mid-to-late summer, new Apple Watch models in the fall, with Garmin and Polar launches sprinkled throughout the year.

The same is true for the smart home gym equipment market, but we already know about some interesting new launches happening in Q1. Peloton just released its Bike+ and is gearing up to release its new, lower-priced Tread on March 30. NordicTrack is planning to launch a new interactive home gym called the Vault, which looks like a cross between the Mirror and Tempo Studio, featuring a 32-inch HD touch screen and a cabinet that neatly holds six pairs of dumbbells, kettlebells, and other workout equipment.

On the software front, Samsung is taking on Apple's new Fitness+ workout streaming service with a new Smart Trainer feature available on its 2021 Neo QLED 8K and 4K TVs. The Samsung Health Smart Trainer promises to analyze your posture in real time, offer real-time feedback about your form, and count your reps.—*Angela Moscaritolo*

Smart Home and Appliances

If all the time you've been spending at home during the COVID-19 pandemic has you thinking about upgrading your abode with connected devices you can control from your phone or by voice, rest assured that there will be no shortage of them at CES.

Expect new connected refrigerators and ovens from top brands, along with smaller smart home products like robot vacuums and mops, security cameras, locks, thermostats, and connected lighting solutions. Most big-name companies are keeping their smart home announcements under wraps until the show begins, but GE Lighting's Cync brand is launching a new outdoor smart plug that works with Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa as well as a cloud-connected 1080p indoor security camera with night vision, two-way audio, and 24/7 mobile alerts with motion detection.

And with COVID-19 still top-of-mind, we can also expect to see plenty of air purification innovations at the show. *—Angela Moscaritolo*

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