SMART WATCHES AND WHEELS

BY JAN TEGLER

AUDI & LG SHOWCASE TECHNOLOGY UNITING WATCHES AND AUTOMOBILES.

captions

In early January, Audi's Board Member for Technical development Dr. Ulrich Hackenburg strode onto a stage at the 2015 International CES to give a presentation on the automaker's developing piloted-driving technology. On his wrist, was a smart watch prototype from consumer electronics maker LG.

HACKENBURG BRIEFLY OUTLINED the latest achievements of the German manufacturer's piloted-driving (a technology that will lead to autonomous vehicles) program then dramatically announced, "All of our latest innovation technologies are part of this concept car. Let me show you what I mean."

Uncovering his left wrist, he continued, "With my LG Smart watch Audi Collection, I will call the car on stage and here we go..."

Music rose as Audi's Prologue Concept Car fired its engine and drove a few feet from stage left to near the center of the platform. Hackenburg then turned off the engine using the smartwatch. The technology he claimed to demonstrate is newish but not exclusive to this Audi-LG partnership. Among others, Hyundai (via its Android-Wear-supported Blue Link app) and vehicle security system maker Viper (via its SmartStart app) have recently announced that their technologies will allow you to lock/unlock and start/stop your car's engine using a smartphone or smartwatch.

Moreover, those of us in the non-smartwatch world are well aware that Jaeger LeCoultre has offered mechanical timepieces in its AMVOX collection that could lock/unlock various Aston Martin models (employing a transponder/antenna) since 2006. In 2014, Jaeger-LeCoultre introduced the Amvox2 Transponder, which works with any contemporary Aston Martin model and will also turn headlights on/off.

LAUNCH IN KOREA

AUDI'S DEMONSTRATION CREATED quite a buzz, however, so we decided to find out more. The as yet untitled smartwatch is based on LG's new Watch Urbane LTE smartwatch, a device that launches in Korea this spring according to Kenneth Hong, LG's director of Global Communications. Hong says the Audi-LG partnership came about in mid-2014 when executives from LG visited Audi HQ. "After hearing what we were working on in the wearable space, Audi execs were intrigued." Employing LG's modified WebOS (now known as LG Wearable Platform) on an LTE network, the smartwatch doesn't technically have to be tethered to a smartphone for functionality (including standalone phone calls and messaging) and incorporates secure Near Field Communications technology.

Evolved from radio frequency identification

(RFID), NFC is basically a short-range, low power wireless link - think of it as Wi-Fi lite - that has been developed primarily as a mobile wallet technology for smartphones. No need to carry a credit card, just use your smartphone or smartwatch to make purchases.

Audi's version of the LG Watch Urbane takes NFC technology further, to perform some of the functions demonstrated by Hackenburg, says Anupam Malhotra, senior manager of connected vehicles at Audi of America.

"We showed our concept of opening/closing the car and starting the engine of the car by using modern NFC technology and a very secure way to handle the necessary data to do this. A lot of additional functions are possible and in development."

According to Malhotra, some of those functions may include summoning a vehicle from a parking spot, receiving and managing alerts and "as the capabilities of wearable products improve and become more reliable, a more evolved integration of these features (e.g. fitness and health monitoring) with connected functions in the vehicle such as Telematics will be realizable."

STILL A PROTOTYPE

DESPITE HACKENBURG'S illustration, summoning a self-piloted Audi from a parking spot with a smartwatch is not yet feasible. But the lock/unlock and start/stop engine features other players are incorporating could be soon part of an Audi "LG Smartwatch Audi Collection" or "Audi Mobile Key".

captions

Somewhat unsatisfyingly, Audi says the smartwatch it showed off at International CES - then at the Mobile World Congress in March is a prototype for now. Malhotra and Audi would only say that "it will come to market at a later date that has not yet been confirmed." Smartwatches for Smart Cars? It seems plausible but as with so much of the smartwatch world, so far, more is promised than delivered. ◗