Episode Book

EPISODE #6010

Ten Ridiculous Wearables, Ranked by Sincerity

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SYNOPSIS

Wearable tech promised to change how we live. It gave us step counters, a haptic buzz when someone likes your photo, and a robot that feeds you tomatoes mid-marathon. This episode tours ten of the strangest wearables ever manufactured — not failures, exactly, but objects built with complete sincerity that look absurd on a human body. From Necomimi's brainwave-controlled cat ears (a real product, torn down by Adafruit, sold at Comic-Con for $99.95) to the 1880 umbrella hat that's still solving a real problem for wheelchair users, the through-line is what we call the seriousness gap: nobody at any of these companies was winking. Along the way we hand out three entirely unofficial prizes — Most Unnecessary, Weirdest Overall, and Most Surprisingly Useful — and argue about why "ridiculous" and "useless" are not the same word.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What problem did the inventor think they were solving? That's the question Daniel wants us to sit with.



Herman

The cat ears. It's always the cat ears.



Corn

Daniel sent us a prompt asking for a lighthearted tour of ten of the most ridiculous wearable technologies ever invented. Not failures necessarily — he's careful about that. Bizarre, wildly unnecessary, comically impractical, eccentric. He wants what each one does, who built it, how it works, and whether anybody actually bought one. And at the end, three entirely unofficial prizes: Most Unnecessary, Weirdest Overall, and Most Surprisingly Useful.



Herman

The through-line is that almost none of these were jokes. People built them with total sincerity, which is the only reason they're funny.



Corn

That's the whole episode. The gap between how seriously someone built a thing and how it looks on your head.



Herman

Wearable tech promised to change how we live. It gave us step counters and a haptic buzz every time someone likes a photo.



Corn

Three thousand dollars of research and development to tell a man he's been sitting down for an hour.



Herman

And the absurd ones are, in a way, more honest about what the category is. A watch that counts your steps and a headband that reads your brainwaves and wiggles felt ears are both answering the question "what if the body were a device."



Corn

Make a list of the weird ones, and you learn more about the people who funded them than you do from the sensible ones.



Herman

So the spine of this whole episode, the thing I'd hang it on, is what I'd call the seriousness gap. Take Necomimi, the brainwave cat ears. Take Smarter Socks. Take the QR Tie. Every one of them was designed, engineered, manufactured, packaged and marketed by people who believed in it.



Corn

The comedy is entirely unintentional.



Herman

Entirely. Nobody at any of those companies was winking. That's what makes it land.



Corn

And then there's the recurring failure mode, which I want on the table early, because once you see it you can't unsee it. The inventors solve the interface and forget the human.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

Glove One can't hold anything. The Rufus Cuff is too big for a wrist. The Neptune Pine is too big for an arm with a sleeve on it. The Xybernaut Poma puts a display over one eye and blocks the other.



Herman

The engineering works. The wearing doesn't.



Corn

Which is my whole position on objects generally, and I've been over this. Most things are shaped badly.



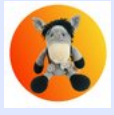
Herman

We'll get to the touchscreen thing later if you're going to do the touchscreen thing.



Corn

I'm going to do the touchscreen thing.



Herman

But there's a counter-current, and it's the reason the third prize is the interesting one. Some of these sound absurd and rest on sound science, or serve a real accessibility need. Ridiculous and useless are not the same word. Daniel's prompt treats them as different, and he's right to.



Corn

That's the tension. Half of this list is nonsense and half of it is a good idea wearing a costume.



Herman

So let's start at the top. Brainwave cat ears.



Corn

Necomimi.



Herman

Necomimi is a headband with two fuzzy motorized cat ears on top, and the ears move according to your mental state. Neurowear, a Japanese design company, built it, and it's a Dentsu project. The sensor underneath is NeuroSky's ThinkGear.



Corn

How does it actually read a brain?



Herman

A sensor on the forehead picks up electrical impulses from neurons firing. That signal is tiny and buried in noise — muscle movement, ambient electrical hum, your own pulse — so the headset filters the environmental noise out and runs NeuroSky's two algorithms, Attention and Meditation. Those two numbers drive the ears.



Corn

So the ears are a display for two numbers.



Herman

Attention up, ears shoot straight up. Relaxed, they flatten. And when both fire at once, the ears twitch. NeuroSky's own material says that twitching state matches what they call elite athletes in the zone.



Corn

So focus and calm at the same time, and the machine reads that as one thing.



Herman

One thing with a specific motion. That's the whole product. And the origin story is the best part of it. There was a product planner at Neurowear who was shy, and she wanted a way to express herself without speaking. She found the NeuroSky MindWave headset and proposed linking brainwave tech to what she called a fun form of self-expression.



Corn

Shy person builds a machine that broadcasts her inner state to a room.



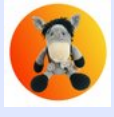
Herman

With cat ears on top, so nobody reads it as a mood ring. They read it as cute.



Corn

That's the comedy sketch, played straight. The premise is "what if you could not hide how you feel," and it's sold as a fashion accessory.



Herman

And people bought it. It launched in the States at San Diego Comic-Con on July 12, 2012. Ninety-nine ninety-five.



Corn

That's cheap for a brain interface.



Herman

NeuroSky's CEO, Stanley Yang, told the LA Times the following spring, "They're a lot of fun." The LA Times also warned that they're not for anyone who likes to be mysterious and inscrutable, because they enable people to read your mind. Their words.



Corn

A newspaper issuing a public warning that a hat can read your mind.



Herman

And it's a real product, not vaporware. Adafruit did a full teardown in July 2013 — cracked it open, photographed the boards. It's a shipping, disassemblable object.



Corn

So you can buy one, take it apart, and find the brain sensor inside, and it does exactly what the box says.



Herman

It does less than the box says, but it does what the box says.



Corn

How much less?



Herman

Attention and Meditation are not thoughts. They're two derived scalars. You could not tell from the ears whether I was doing arithmetic or watching a bird.



Corn

Right. It doesn't read your mind. It reads one dimension of your arousal and calls it personality.



Herman

Which is exactly why it's charming. It promises mind-reading and delivers a mood bar.



Corn

So that's brainwave-controlled cat ears. Real product, real teardown, real ninety-nine ninety-five. But the urge to wear something ridiculous on your head goes back a lot further than brainwave sensors.



Herman

A hundred and thirty years further.



Corn

December 1880. US patent two fifty, eight hundred three. An umbrella canopy attached to a headband, worn hands-free.



Herman

The umbrella hat. And the man who gets the credit in Seattle folklore — Robert W. Patten, the Umbrella Man — claimed he invented it while prospecting in Mexico, and his original version had a mosquito net hanging off it.



Corn

He also claimed to have been a lot of things.



Herman

He was seen as eccentric, and the local papers mocked him in cartoons. A man walking around Seattle under a personal roof.



Corn

A personal roof is not obviously a bad idea.



Herman

It gets a second act, though. The red-and-white version, the brockabrella. Marketed by the father of the actor Billy Crudup, and endorsed by the baseball Hall of Famer Lou Brock, which is where the name comes from. Brief popularity in St. Louis in the middle of the last century.



Corn

Red and white is the color of a thing people already own.



Herman

And here's where the umbrella hat stops being a novelty. It's useful to wheelchair users who need both hands in the rain. Gardeners, fishers, canvassers — anyone whose job keeps their hands occupied in weather. There are multiple patents for hands-free umbrella harnesses, including a modern one numbered US eight nine four four three zero zero B one, and a wearable umbrella holder patented in Texas in 1908.



Corn

So over a century of people trying to solve the same problem, and the solution is still a hat.



Herman

The solution keeps being a hat.



Corn

Somewhere in that century, somebody with a wheelchair, rain, and two full hands, used one of these and it worked, and that's the whole case.



Herman

That's the case. The umbrella hat at least kept the rain off. The next one was designed to keep your voice in.



Corn

Hushme.



Herman

A mask that covers the mouth and muffles your voice during phone calls, so the people around you can't hear what you're saying. It was shown at CES in 2017 and The Verge covered it that January.



Corn

And that's where my confidence ends.



Herman

And I'd rather say that on air than pretend. Wikipedia has no article on it. The Verge's specific page from that week is gone — it returns a 404 now. What's confirmed is that it's a mouth-covering mask that muffles voice on calls, and that it was shown at CES 2017.



Corn

So it exists, it was demoed, and the paper trail is one convention and a dead link.



Herman

I've seen it described as having little speaker cups that play ambient sound near your mouth, but I'm not going to stand behind the cup design. If someone actually shipped it, I haven't seen the receipt.



Corn

You're a physician. Does a mask over the mouth even do that?



Herman

A bare mask does very little. The sound leaves your head through your nose, through your skull, through your jaw, and out of the neck and chest. Covering the mouth cuts some of the high frequencies and leaves the low ones, and the low ones are what carry through a wall. Babble, basically. You'd need to actively cancel the output near your mouth to get anywhere close to real privacy.



Corn

So the honest version is that it muffles and people nearby still hear the vowels.



Herman

And honestly I can't rule out that the demos sounded better than the physics.



Corn

Somewhere in that same building, every year, there's a booth selling a sealed helmet.



Herman

And that one has a patent number and no dead link.



Corn

So Necomimi, the umbrella hat, Hushme. Three sincere attempts to solve a real human problem — self-expression, hands-free rain protection, call privacy — and all three landed somewhere between novelty and wouldn't wear that in public.



Herman

Those three all tried to solve a real human problem. The next batch mostly tried to solve a problem that existed only in the inventor's head.

L

Larry

Are you tired of being able to eat with both hands free?

L

Larry

Introducing the Necomimi Feedmaster Pro, the world's first wearable brainwave-controlled feeding system. It reads your Attention score, and when you're focused, it lifts the food to your mouth for you. When you're relaxed, it holds still. When you're both? Your meal spins gently in a very small circle. Perfect for the morning commute, the marathon, the open-heart surgery, or any moment you simply cannot afford to lift one arm.

L

Larry

Side effects include: snapping at your own elbow, ketchup on your forehead, a permanent nine-millimeter gap in your attention span, and mild-to-severe elevation of your cat. If you own a cat, sell the cat. Batteries not included, batteries not invented, no batteries. Do not use the Feedmaster while driving, sleeping, or eating. Results may vary. Results will vary. This ad was placed by nobody. Terms apply.



Corn

Are we doing ads now?



Herman

Apparently we're doing ads now.



Corn

Fine. It's the weather.



Herman

It's the weather, and we're not dressed for it. Where were we?



Corn

You were saying the next batch solved a problem that existed in the inventor's head.



Herman

Tomatan. A wearable robot that dispenses tomatoes for runners to eat during a race. Japanese vegetable-juice company Kagome, unveiled in 2015. It weighs eighteen pounds and it's essentially a robot with a tomato for a head that you take for a shoulder ride, feeding you with circular metal arms.



Corn

Eighteen pounds. On your shoulders. While running.



Herman

Kagome's stated rationale is that tomatoes combat fatigue. And Wareable's verdict was that it's not a disaster — it's glorious.



Corn

A juice company, with a marketing budget, and someone said yes to the tomato backpack.



Herman

Someone drew it on a whiteboard and somebody else nodded.



Corn

What I'd want to know is whether the runner finishes faster or finishier.



Herman

You mean slower and with tomato.



Corn

I mean slower and with tomato.



Herman

That's the Weirdest Overall front-runner, and it isn't close. Glove One is the ergonomics failure in its purest form. It's a 3D-printed glove that is itself the phone — the numbers are on the insides of the fingers, so you dial by pressing your own fingertips. Microphone and speaker are in the thumb and the pinkie.



Corn

So the hand is the circuit board.



Herman

The hand is the handset. And Wareable's line on it is the whole point: it'll probably fail as soon as you have to pick things up or hold things.



Corn

A phone you can't hold anything with.



Herman

And I've done clinic time. A patient hands you a folder, and you take it. That's the exam. A device that stops you taking the folder is not a device.



Corn

Glove One is a phone that gives the hand a second job and forgets the first one.



Herman

Smarter Socks. Blacksocks — socks with RFID tags, plus a scanner to keep the pairs together, plus an app that measures how much the black has faded.



Corn

The app measures the fade.



Herman

Wareable's line is the best one in the whole taxonomy: this is a serious thing and not a joke.



Corn

A team of engineers built a sock with a radio tag and an app, and the problem was that socks go missing.



Herman

And fade unevenly.



Corn

The dryer ate it. The fade is not the problem, the dryer's the problem.



Herman

And Smarter Socks is your Most Unnecessary front-runner. It solves a problem nobody knew they had, with total sincerity.



Corn

The QR Tie is its opposition on the same ballot. A necktie with a QR code printed on it so people can scan your personal details.



Herman

It raised two thousand one hundred and twelve dollars of a forty thousand dollar goal.



Corn

Five percent of the way to a tie.



Herman

And the Tweeting Bra, which is a bra that tweeted whenever the Greek celebrity Maria Bakodimou undid it, worn for two weeks to promote breast-cancer awareness. Then there's the SHE bra, Society Harnessing Equipment, which delivers a three thousand eight hundred volt shock to a would-be attacker.



Corn

Those are not the same product in any sense.



Herman

One's a publicity stunt and one is a genuine self-defense device. And the second one only sounds like a comedy sketch because it's a bra.



Corn

Three thousand eight hundred volts is the spec of a real weapon.



Herman

It is. And the tonal whiplash between those two entries could carry an episode of its own.



Corn

There's a Microsoft mood-sensing bra too.



Herman

It shows up in a roundup of the worst bits of wearable tech in 2014, and it's thin. No dedicated source confirming specs, dates, or whether it shipped. I'd treat it as a prototype claim and nothing more.



Corn

Which is one more thing than most prototypes get.



Herman

Peekiboo. A baby hat with a camera in it that snaps a photo whenever it detects the baby's brain activity — the theory being that you'd capture whatever was stimulating them.



Corn

So the hat watches what the baby is thinking about.



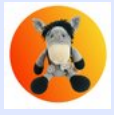
Herman

That's the pitch. And Ping, which is a social networking garment — the hood goes up and it sends one preset message to Facebook, the hood goes down and it sends another.



Corn

So you're telling the room where your neck is.



Herman

And Power Wellies, Orange's boots for Glastonbury with a thermoelectric sole — Seebeck effect, heat into voltage — so it charges your phone from your foot heat. Wareable's line is that they assume it didn't work, because they haven't seen it since.



Corn

Which is the only sourcing note in the world that doubles as an obituary.



Herman

Re-Timer. Glasses that shine dull light at your eyes to reset your circadian rhythm for shift workers and jet lag. The science is pretty sound. It makes you look like you're wearing a broken virtual reality headset and joined a cult.



Corn

You've read the shift-work literature.



Herman

I've read it. Light is the main lever on the clock. Give someone bright light at the wrong hour and you can move their whole rhythm, and that's real, and it works.



Corn

But the glasses themselves...



Herman

A pair of glasses putting out a specific wavelength at a specific time is the boring version of a treatment that actually works. And it looks like a headset from 1994.



Corn

That's the Most Surprisingly Useful front-runner. Now the second tier.



Herman

Cat Ear Headphones. Ninety-nine dollars, glowing cat ears, and the ears are also outward-facing speakers.



Corn

Speakers pointed away from the ears.



Herman

Pointed away from your own ears. Wareable's line is that nothing says don't engage with me like accessorising your head with glowing cat ears.



Corn

The Cat Ear Headphones are engineered to say the opposite of what they say.



Herman

Rufus Cuff — a wearable bracelet that is really just a smartphone with a strap. It makes you look like you're under house arrest.



Corn

A phone with a bigger phone strapped to it.



Herman

The Beauty and the Geek jeans, 2012. Jeans that turn the crotch into a working mouse, keyboard and speakers. The designer told Wired it meant you didn't have to be stiff behind your screen.



Corn

Buy a desk, or wear a desk.



Herman

The Xybernaut Poma, from 2002. A wearable Windows CE computer. The display is a golf ball on the end of an arm, dangling over one eye, and the keyboard is a chording device you wear on the wrist and are supposed to type on while walking. One thousand four hundred and ninety-nine dollars.



Corn

One eye on the world, one eye on the golf ball, and all typing done by a wrist.



Herman

Mercury News' Mike Langberg reviewed it. His line: I can't recommend that anyone submit themselves to a Poma pummeling.



Corn

A reviewer punned the product name and somehow that's the most dignified thing in this whole episode.



Herman

The Neptune Pine. A smartwatch with a two point four inch screen, so large that, in Wareable's phrasing, you'd never be able to wear a long-sleeved shirt again.



Corn

A sleeve is the oldest wearable there is, and it beat the Pine.



Herman

The sleeve won. So that's the tour. Ten wearables, all real, all built with complete seriousness. Which means it's time for the three entirely unofficial prizes.



Corn

Most Unnecessary. Smarter Socks or the QR Tie. Both solve a problem nobody knew they had, with total sincerity. But the QR Tie raised five percent of a campaign to turn your tie into a business card, and the Smarter Socks team built a scanner. Daniel's question is which one solves the problem nobody knew they had. I'd give it to Smarter Socks, because the tie at least has a social job.



Herman

Smarter Socks. The sock with an RFID tag to track its pair, and an app to measure how much the black has faded. That's a radio tag, a reader, and a software team, spent on the problem that socks go missing.



Corn

Weirdest Overall. Tomatan or Necomimi.



Herman

Tomatan. Eighteen pounds of robot on your shoulders the whole race, feeding tomatoes out of circular metal arms, from a juice company, whose stated reason is that tomatoes combat fatigue.



Corn

Necomimi put a brainwave sensor inside a novelty and shipped it, and it's still the most famous thing in this taxonomy.



Herman

It's the famous one. Tomatan is the one that makes you stop and picture the marathon in progress. Eighteen pounds, and the guy has to eat while running.



Corn

Most Surprisingly Useful. Re-Timer or the umbrella hat.



Herman

The umbrella hat. Re-Timer rests on better science, but the umbrella hat is a real accessibility aid — hands free in the rain, for anyone in a wheelchair. And you can buy one for the price of a coffee.



Corn

Re-Timer is the better science and the umbrella hat is the better object.



Herman

And that's the thesis, when you boil the ten down. The ridiculous wearables that endure are the ones that respect the human body. The ones that fail — Glove One, the Rufus Cuff, the Neptune Pine, the Poma — solved the interface and forgot the human.



Corn

The interface is the fun part to build. The human is where the holding of the folder happens.



Herman

Every one of them was sincere. That's the part I keep coming back to. Smarter Socks is a serious product. The QR Tie is a serious product. Necomimi is a serious product.



Corn

The comedy is the gap between the workshop and the wrist.



Hilbert

I have to correct something about the umbrella hat.



Herman

The umbrella hat, sure.



Hilbert

The brockabrella was not designed red and white. The factory had surplus nylon from a cancelled order of something else, and it was already cut into canopy shapes. Red and white was inventory. The colour was an accident of the stockroom.



Corn

A cancelled order of what?



Hilbert

Something for a parade, or a funeral. I never got the full story. It was cut into canopies before anybody decided what it was for.



Herman

There's a whole marriage between a product and a market that only existed because of what a factory happened to have on a shelf.



Hilbert

The wheelchair case is the surprising part for you two. It's not the surprising part. The surprising part is that the brockabrella was almost a completely different product, and the only reason it became an umbrella hat is that the nylon was already around.



Corn

And how do you know this?



Hilbert

I have one. Original, still in the box.



Herman

You have an original brockabrella.



Hilbert

Somebody from St. Louis has been trying to buy it off me for years. I won't give him the name. It sits in the closet with the rest of the collection.



Corn

The rest of the collection of what?



Hilbert

Doesn't matter.



Herman

You know, if the dye lot was the whole reason it existed, then the umbrella hat as a product was never a design at all. It was leftover fabric wearing a patent.



Hilbert

That's right. The patent's from 1880. The nylon is from a lot later.



Corn

He's been holding that all episode and just waited for the box to come up.



Hilbert

Somebody had to correct it.



Herman

Someone who has never once let a wrong detail stand, is what we call that.



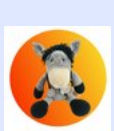
Hilbert

And I'd do it again.



Corn

So there's a factory floor somewhere in the middle of the last century, standing in the rain, deciding what to do with a warehouse of cut nylon.



Herman

Red and white was a surplus problem.



Corn

Which is a better origin story than any of the ten we just told.



Herman

It's the correct answer to Daniel's first question, honestly, and we didn't even get there in the tour. What problem did the inventor think they were solving? For the brockabrella, the answer is the problem of a factory holding a hundred pounds of nylon in the wrong colour for anything else.



Corn

So the prize list gets rewritten by a man and his closet.



Herman

The umbrella hat is the most surprisingly useful thing in the whole taxonomy, and it only exists because of a cancelled order.



Corn

What I take from the whole tour is that as wearables get smaller and more capable, the temptation to build the next Necomimi or the next Tomatan doesn't go away. It gets cheaper.



Herman

The brain sensor in that headband now lives in a phone. The next Necomimi is a firmware update away.



Corn

Which is the open question for the next decade of wearables. The engineering gets better; the question of whether to wear it stays exactly as unanswerable as it was in 1880.



Herman

Yeah. And if you enjoyed the tour of gloriously sincere absurdity, subscribe, rate, and tell a friend who owns a smartwatch they never use. That's my weird prompts dot com. Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

And send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode eight, Building Your Own Whisper; episode ten, How ASR Went From Frustration To … Whisper Magic; and episode seven, Building Custom ASR Tools. This has been My Weird Prompts…



Corn

…the human-AI collaboration podcast. We'll be back soon.

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