Apple’s Vision Pro VR is incredible technology but is it useful?

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As people begin to report on their hands-on time with Apple’s Vision Pro VR headset, it’s becoming increasingly clear that the company has produced an incredible piece of hardware. Even in limited demonstrations, users have praised the company’s extraordinary work producing the two postage-stamp-sized screens that sit in each eyepiece and pack in more pixels than a 4K TV; they’ve been stunned by the quality of the “passthrough” video, which shows wearers what’s happening in the outside world in enough detail that they can even use their phones while wearing the headset; and they’ve been impressed by the casual ease with which the gesture controls on the new hardware work, with an array of infrared cameras letting users make small and subtle hand movements to select and scroll rather than relying on bulky controllers. Of course, it should be that good. For $3,499 (£2,816, but UK pricing, and indeed launch, is yet to be confirmed), Apple is releasing a product well beyond the top end of the current market, where devices such as Valve’s $999 Vive are seen as the pinnacle of quality. But if the company has shown that it has what it takes to make the best VR headset in the world, it has done less to make the case that the best VR headset in the world is something people should want. Heralding the release as the dawn of “the era of spatial computing”, Apple defensively compared the $3,499 price tag to the cost of fitting out a home with a huge TV, surround sound system, powerful computer, and state-of-the-art games console – suggesting that it thinks the Vision Pro will one day be able to replace all those things. It’s a similar pitch to that made by the late Steve Jobs when the iPhone launched: Apple would be launching “a widescreen iPod with touch controls, a revolutionary mobile phone, and a breakthrough Internet communications device” – and they would all be the same product. But where there is obvious appeal in reducing three pocketable-devices into one, it’s less clear that there’s a pressing need to unify the TV, laptop and sound system into one device at home. Similarly, the biggest differences between Apple’s headset and the competition aren’t those that are focused on raw tech specs, but the company’s clear desire to create a headset that people don’t need to take off. The EyeSight feature, which displays the user’s eyes on a screen on the front of the headset, is designed to make it more appealing to have conversations with those around you without removing your headset; the external battery pack moves weight from your head to your pockets, making it comfortable to wear the device for longer (and, if plugged into a power socket, Apple says, it can even be worn “all day”); even at work, the company suggests, you might want to open up your Mac laptop without taking off your Vision Pro, and type on a larger virtual screen floating in front of you. The product feels like it’s been reverse-engineered from the future to the present. In a decade, when the technology has been miniaturised and commercialised, it’s possible to envision a world where everyone is wearing unobtrusive “smart glasses” for much of the day, eschewing

other devices like phones and laptops as unnecessary. And to get there requires starting from here: beginning with a chunky headset and improving it every year. It's a future in which Apple continues its domination of consumer electronics. But what's less clear is whether it's a vision – and a Vision – that anyone else should want.